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OCT/NOV

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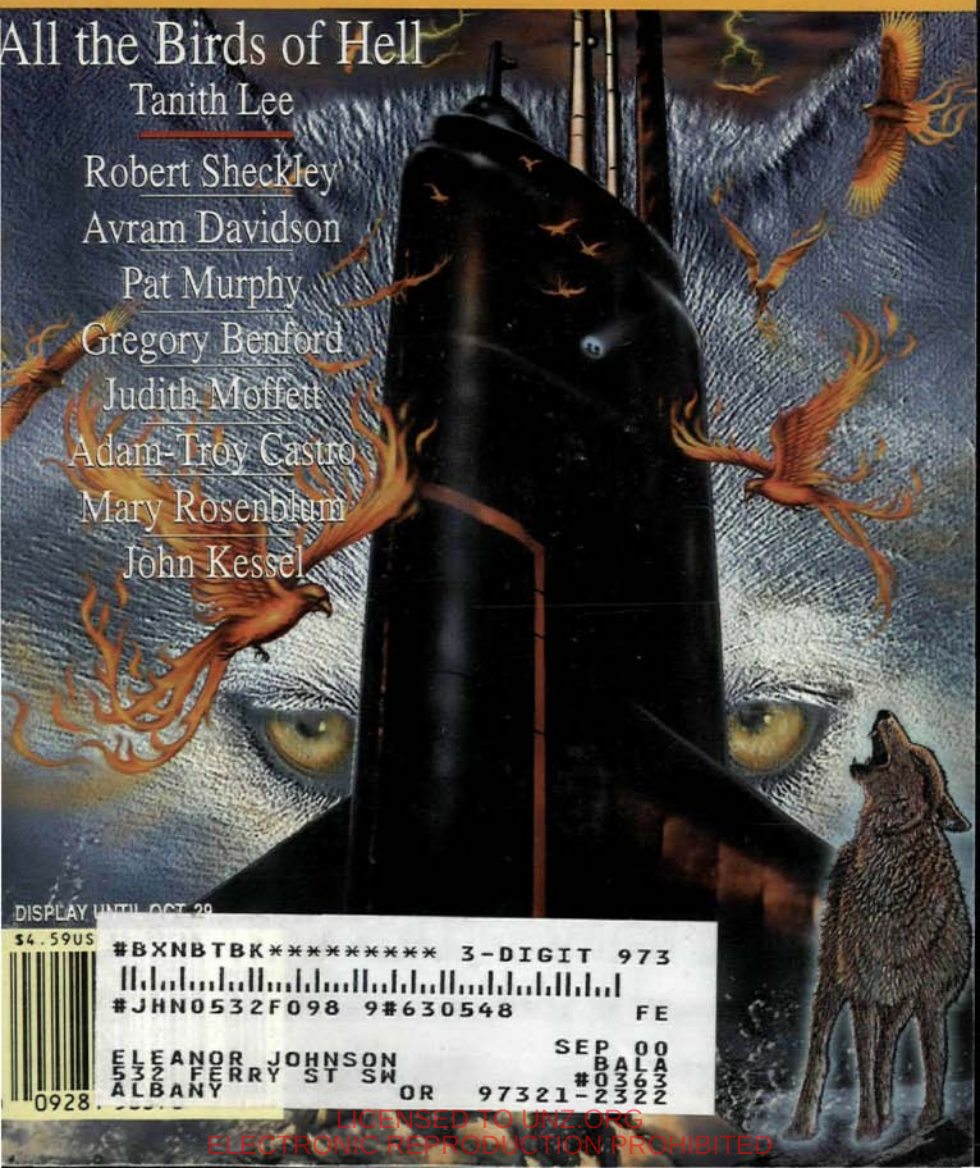

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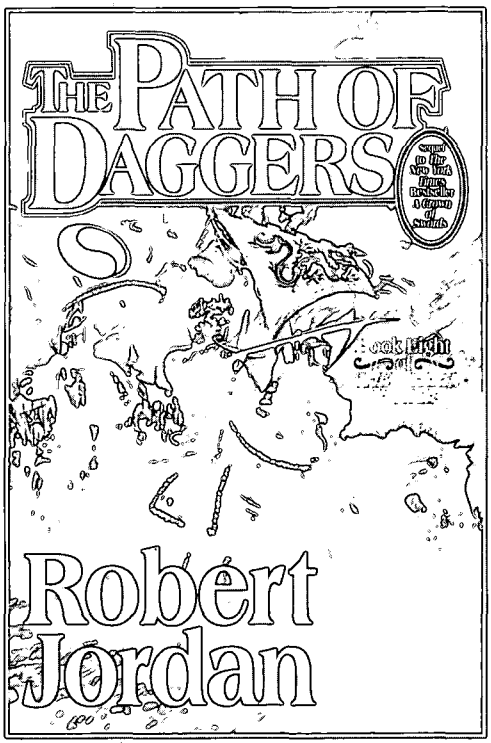

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October/November • 50th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

UNLIKE A LOT of sf fans I know, I'm neither a first nor an only child. My older brother had been around for three and a half years when I came along, and he never let me forget that fact. As per the rules of *The Official Older Sibling Handbook*,[1] nothing I did ever impressed my brother. Whatever I said or did, my brother had already seen or done better.

As I grew up, I recognized that I couldn't win this game, so I stopped trying so hard to impress him. And that, of course, was when I discovered he'd been impressed all along.

Various critics credit the birth of science fiction to Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or Hugo Gernsback, but nobody yet has suggested that sf is older than realistic, "mainstream" fiction. As Robert Killheffer points out in his column this month, sf is like many other contemporary genres in that it matured in the pulps during the early part of this century.

When is it ever going to realize it can't win the game of trying to impress the mainstream?

My lament this month is brought on by an article in the June *Voice Literary Supplement* by Jonathan Lethem. In "Close Encounters: The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction," Jonathan argues that science fiction missed its opportunity in the 1970s to bring down the genre walls and merge with the mainstream. He uses the fact that Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* beat out Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* for the 1973 Nebula Award as a tombstone to mark the point where science fiction blew its chance.

I consider Jonathan one of the most widely- and well-read people I know — it's scarcely a coincidence that he contributes this month's "Curiosities" column, since he has

[1]I'm *sure* that such a book exists — I just know it — but rule number one is that younger siblings can never ever see it.

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TERRY GOODKIND

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller

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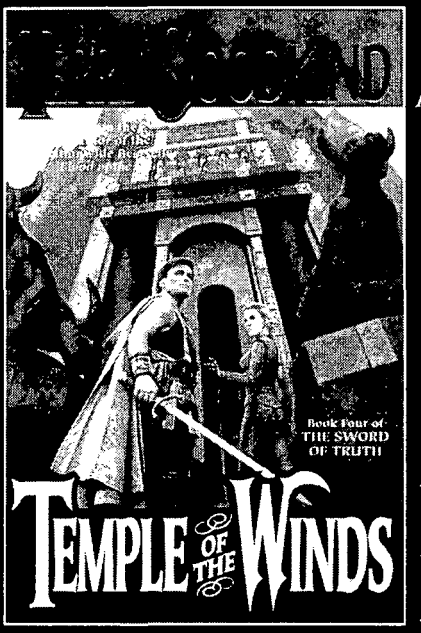

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been steering me toward good books for years. But I think he's off target here.

Jonathan's main argument is that sf's 1960s New Wave produced masterpieces in the early 1970s like *Dhalgren*, *A Scanner Darkly*, *The Dispossessed*, and *334*, and as a result of these books it stood poised on the brink of literary acceptability. Then:

> just as SF's best writers began to beg the question of whether SF might be literature, American literary fiction began to open to the modes it had excluded. Writers like Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, and Robert Coover restored the place of the imaginative and surreal, while others like Don DeLillo and Joseph McElroy began to contend with the emergent technoculture. William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon did a little of both. The result was that the need to recognize SF's accomplishments dwindled away.

The result, says Jonathan, is that sf's literary writers exist now in a twilight world, neither respectable nor commercially viable. Their work drowns in a sea of garbage in bookstores, while much of sf's promise is realized elsewhere by writers too savvy or oblivious to bother with its stigmatized identity.

Jonathan goes on to wish that:

> the notion of *science fiction* ought to have been gently and lovingly dismantled, and the writers dispersed: children's fantasists here, hardware-fetish thriller writers here, novelizers of films both real and imaginary here. Most important, a ragged handful of heroically enduring and ambitious speculative fabulators should have embarked for the rocky realms of midlist, out-of-category fiction.

Okay, let me say now that aesthetically I'm very sympathetic with Jonathan — in fact, I proposed something similar on a convention panel in 1992, only to have Barry Malzberg lecture me for twenty minutes. "I turned my back on science fiction in 1976," declared Barry, "and I was wrong. The genre is bigger than us; we are here because of it."

Having spent four years in ivy-covered academic halls and ten years at a mainstream publisher editing books in this so-called twilight

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world, I agree mostly with Barry nowadays.

Today the term "science fiction" encompasses so much that I'm leery of generalizing about it, but indulge me. Of all the genres in American fiction, sf is fundamentally the most radical — unlike mysteries or romances or westerns, it can rewrite all the rules, or make up the rules as it goes along. (Indeed, Jonathan Lethem's *Amnesia Moon* is a good example of a book that plays fair with the reader but changes the rules in midstream.) As John W. Campbell always argued, it has the widest scope and the most freedom of any literary form[2], and consequently it intimidates many readers. A science fiction novel can challenge a reader in ways no other novel can.

In a *New Yorker* review circa 1990, John Updike argued that sf relies on spectacle for its entertainment value, and as Aristotle taught us, spectacle is the most base of all artistic goals. Personally, I think it's foolish to deny the spectacular nature of sf. This genre is a form of *popular* literature; its inherent goal is to entertain (unlike much mainstream fiction). Some people will forever adopt the attitude espoused by John Updike and look down on sf because it remains a story-driven and primarily popular art form.

Those people seem to be the ones whose respect Jonathan seeks, if I understand him correctly when he refers to "literary respectability." When I hear those words, I think of green pastures on the other side of the fence. They mark the exact spot where I disagree with Jonathan.

For one thing, as I've stated many times in many places, things are no better in the mainstream than they are in the genre. Indeed, they're generally worse: the "rocky realms of midlist, out-of-category fiction" are the one place where books get ignored most. I once sat on a panel with William Trotter, whose first novel *Winter Fire* was published handsomely in those rocky realms. "How many reviews did you get?" I asked. "Well, we got the trade reviews, and the *Times* review was okay." When I asked if he got any other reviews, he said, "Yes, there was one other, in *Deathrealm*."

The commercial prospects are even worse. It would be improper for me to cite sales figures and such, but I believe that the careers of such novelists as Jack Womack, Jonathan Carroll, and Jack Cady would have

[2]Actually, I suppose I'm lumping fantasy in with sf, but let's leave aside *that* can of worms.

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foundered on those rocky shores after two or three novels each were it not for the genre and genre editors. I could go on, I could cite the careers of mainstream novelists that *have* petered out because nobody would publish their third or fourth books, but to keep this short I'll limit myself to pointing out the ironic fact that some of the writers Jonathan names as "ascendant powers" in our "literary culture" don't sell nearly as well as do Jonathan's own books. Trust me. I've seen the figures.

Enough about the grass-is-greener syndrome; every writer is prone to some envy. It's an occupational hazard. What I really want to address is this notion of "literary respectability." I have grave problems with it. In 1973 it meant something different, but here in 1998, it's more than forty years after such American masterpieces as *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Fahrenheit 451* were born in the sf genre, thirty-plus years since Daniel M. Keyes illuminated the human condition with help from a mouse named Algernon, more than a quarter of a century after J. G. Ballard *Crash*ed into the literary field and Harlequin let loose those jelly beans. The science fiction field has fostered and grown numerous such works whose literary merits are, to my mind, incontrovertible. In light of the evidence they provide, I think that any critic who summarily dismisses sf is guilty of literary bigotry, prejudging the fiction by the color of its cover.[3]

And who really needs Archie Bunker's respect? At least my older brother recognized the content of my character. People like some editors at *The New York Times Book Review* obviously judge books by their covers, and I see no virtue in seeking their approval.

I do think Jonathan Lethem's right in pointing out that the sf genre no longer means what it used to mean. The sf publishing category hasn't entirely kept pace with the tastes of American readers. A lot of writers and readers are stuck in the twilight because publishing doesn't know the right way to put the two together (and the few efforts at doing so, such as Dell's "Cutting Edge" trade paperback line about four years ago, never really got a chance). But I think the answer lies in shifting the boundaries of the genre, not in knocking them down.

Let me end with one brief

[3]Please note that I'm not questioning anyone's right to read whatever suits their tastes. But I think that a critic who dismisses an entire category of fiction — any category — shouldn't keep a closed mind.

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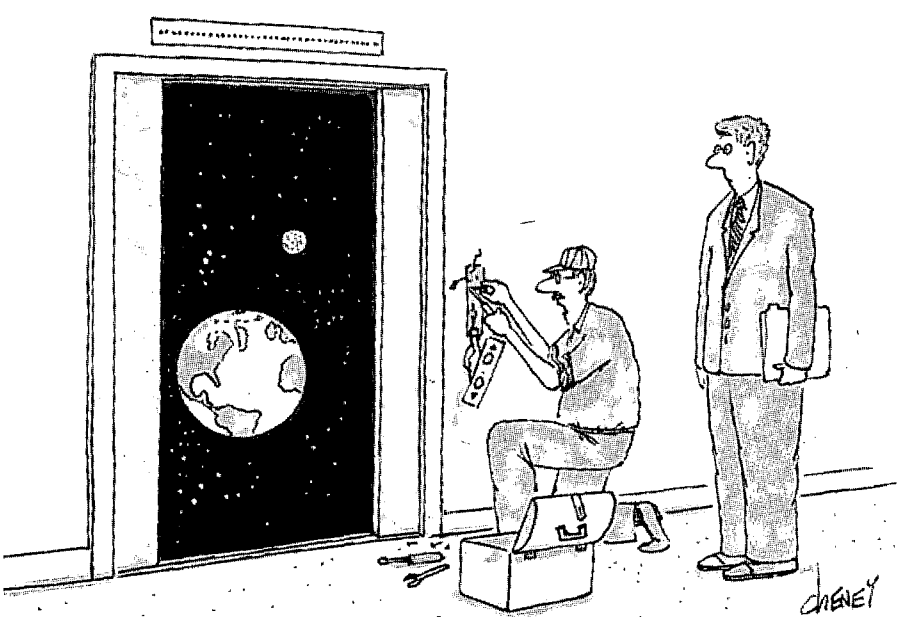
anecdote. In college, I studied with novelist Stephen Wright *(M31, Going Native)* and I still run into him occasionally. Last time I saw him, we got on the subject of how nice it was that Steven Millhauser won the Pulitzer Prize, and Stephen — who is wonderfully opinionated — started sounding off about the Pulitzers. "Did you know that those bastards at Columbia wouldn't give the prize to *Gravity's Rainbow*? The judges all wanted it to win, but the award administrators were afraid of it, so they gave it to something safe...some Civil War novel, I think."

In point of fact, Michael Shaara's lovely novel *The Killer Angels* won the Pulitzer in 1975 (Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* won in 1973, and no award was given in 1974). But if there's any truth to Stephen's claim, and I believe there is, are we to conclude that the mainstream missed its opportunity to merge with sf? Or should we just decide that we're different from our big brother and get on with life?



"I suggest using the stairs."

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Tanith Lee's most recent books include Faces Under Water *and a young adult novel that's due out in England very shortly,* Law of the Wolf Tower. *Her last appearance in these pages was exactly two years ago, with her retake on the Cinderella fairy tale, "The Reason for Not Going to the Ball." She returns now with a very different sort of story, a dark and dazzling vision of a world locked in winter for fifteen years...*

All the Birds of Hell

By Tanith Lee

1

ONCE THEY LEFT THE CITY, the driver started to talk. He went on talking during the two-hour journey, almost without pause. His name was Argenty, but the dialogue was all about his wife. She suffered from what had become known as Twilight Sickness. She spent all day in their flat staring at the electric bulbs. At night she walked out into the streets and he would have to go and fetch her. She had had frostbite several times. He said she had been lovely twenty years ago, though she had always hated the cold.

Henrique Tchaikov listened. He made a few sympathetic sounds. It was as hopeless to try to communicate with the driver, Argenty, as to shut him up. Normally Argenty drove important men from the Bureau, to whom he would not be allowed to speak a word, probably not even Good-day. But Tchaikov was a minor bureaucrat. If Argenty had had a better education and more luck, he might have been where Tchaikov was.

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Argenty's voice became like the landscape beyond the cindery cement blocks of the city, monotonous, inevitably irritating, depressing, useless, sad.

It was the fifteenth year of winter.

Now almost forty, Tchaikov could remember the other seasons of his childhood, even one long hot summer full of liquid colors and now-forgotten smells. By the time he was twelve years old, things were changing forever. In his twenties he saw them go, the palaces of summer, as Eynin called them in his poetry. Tchaikov had been twenty-four when he watched the last natural flower, sprung pale green out of the public lawn, die before him — as Argenty's wife was dying, in another way.

The Industrial Winter, so it was termed. The belching chimneys and the leaking stations with their cylinders of poison. The rotting hulks along the shore like deadly whales.

"The doctor says she'll ruin her eyes, staring at the lights all day," Argenty droned on.

"There's a new drug, isn't there — " Tchaikov tried.

But Argenty took no notice. Probably, when alone, he talked to himself.

Beyond the car, the snowscape spread like heaps of bedclothes, some soiled and some clean. The gray ceiling of the sky bulged low.

Argenty broke off. He said, "There's the wolf factory."

Tchaikov turned his head.

Against the grayness-whiteness, the jagged black of the deserted factory which had been taken over by wolves, was the only landmark.

"They howl often, sound like the old machinery. You'll hear them from the Dacha."

"Yes, they told me I would."

"Look, some of them running about there."

Tchaikov noted the black forms of the wolves, less black than the factory walls and gates, darting up and over the snow heaps, and away around the building. Although things did live out here, it was strange to see something alive.

Then they came down the slope, the chained snow tires grating and punching, and Tchaikov saw the mansion across the plain.

"The river came in here," said Argenty. "Under the ice now."

A plantation of pine trees remained about the house. Possibly they

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were dead, carved out only in frozen snow. The Dacha had two domed towers, a balustraded verandah above a flight of stairs that gleamed like white glass. When the car drove up, he could see two statues at the foot of the steps that had also been kept clear of snow. They were of a stained brownish marble, a god and goddess, both naked and smiling through the brown stains that spread from their mouths.

There were electric lights on in the Dacha, from top to bottom, three or four floors of them, in long, arched windows.

But as the car growled to a halt, Argenty gave a grunt. "Look," he said again, "look. Up there."

They got out and stood on the snow. The cold broke round them like sheer disbelief, but they knew it by now. They stared up. As happened only very occasionally, a lacuna had opened in the low cloud. A dim pink island of sky appeared, and over it floated a dulled lemon slice, dissolving, half transparent, the sun.

Argenty and Tchaikov waited, transfixed, watching in silence. Presently the cloud folded together again and the sky, the sun, vanished.

"I can't tell her," said Argenty. "My wife. I can't tell her I saw the sun. Once it happened in the street. She began to scream. I had to take her to the hospital. She wasn't the only case."

"I'm sorry," said Tchaikov.

He had said this before, but now for the first time Argenty seemed to hear him. "Thank you."

Argenty insisted on carrying Tchaikov's bag to the top of the slippery, gleaming stair, then he pressed the buzzer. The door was of steel and wood, with a glass panel of octople glazing, almost opaque. Through it, in the bluish yellow light, a vast hall could just be made out, with a floor of black and white marble.

A voice spoke through the door apparatus.

"Give your name."

"Henrique Tchaikov. Number sixteen stroke Y."

"You're late."

Tchaikov stood on the top step, explaining to a door. He was enigmatic. There was always a great deal of this.

"The road from Kroy was blocked by an avalanche. It had to be cleared."

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"All right. Come in. Mind the dog, she may be down there."

"Dog," said Argenty. He put his hand into his coat for his gun.

"It's all right," said Tchaikov. "They always keep a dog here."

"Why?" said Argenty blankly.

Tchaikov said, "A guard dog. And for company, I suppose."

Argenty glanced up, toward the domed towers. The walls were reinforced by black cement. The domes were tiled black, mortared by snow. After the glimpse of sun, there was again little color in their world.

"Are they — is it up there?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"Take care," said Argenty surprisingly as the door made its unlocking noise.

Argenty was not allowed to loiter. Tchaikov watched him get back into the car, undo the dash panel and take a swig of vodka. The car turned and drove slowly away, back across the plain.

The previous curator did not give Tchaikov his name. He was a tall thin man with slicked, black hair. Tchaikov knew he was known as Ouperin.

Ouperin showed Tchaikov the map of the mansion, and the pamphlet of house rules. He only mentioned one, that the solarium must not be used for more than one hour per day; it was expensive. He asked if Tchaikov had any questions, wanted to see anything. Tchaikov said it would be fine.

They met the dog in the corridor outside the ballroom, near where Ouperin located what he called his office.

She was a big dog, perhaps part Cuvahl and part Husky, muscular and well-covered, with a thick silken coat like the thick pile carpets, ebony and fawn, with white round her muzzle and on her belly and paws, and two gold eyes that merely slanted at them for a second as she galloped by.

"Dog! Here, dog!" Ouperin called, but she ignored him, prancing on, with balletic shakes of her fringed fur, into the ballroom, where the crystal chandeliers hung down twenty feet on ropes of bronze. "She only comes when she's hungry. There are plenty of steaks for her in the cold room. She goes out a lot," said Ouperin. "Her door's down in the kitchen. Electronic. Nothing else can get in."

They visited the cold room, which was very long, and massively

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shelved, behind a sort of airlock. The room was frigid, the natural weather was permitted to sustain it. The ice on high windows looked like armor.

Ouperin took two bottles of vodka, and a bunch of red grapes, frozen peerless in a wedge of ice.

They sat in his office, along from the ballroom. A fire blazed on the hearth.

"I won't say I've enjoyed it here," said Ouperin. "But there are advantages. There are some — videos and magazines in the suite. You know what I mean. Apart from the library. If you get...hot."

Tchaikov nodded politely.

Ouperin said, "The first thing you'll do, when I go. You'll go up and look at them, won't you?"

"Probably," said Tchaikov.

"You know," said Ouperin, "you get bored with them. At first, they remind you of the fairy story, what is it? The princess who sleeps. Then, you just get bored."

Tchaikov said nothing. They drank the vodka, and at seventeen hours, five o'clock, as the white world outside began to turn glowing blue, a helicopter came and landed on the plain. Ouperin took his bags and went out to the front door of the Dacha, and the stair. "Have some fun," he said.

He ran sliding down the steps and up to the helicopter. He scrambled in like a boy on holiday. It rose as it had descended in a storm of displaced snow. When its noise finally faded through the sky, Tchaikov heard the wolves from the wolf factory howling over the slopes. The sky was dark blue now, navy, without a star. If ever the moon appeared, the moon was blue. The pines settled. A few black boughs showed where the helicopter's winds had scoured off the snow. They were alive. But soon the snow began to come down again, to cover them.

Tchaikov returned to the cold room. He selected a chicken and two steaks and vegetables, and took them to the old stone-floored kitchen down the narrow steps. The new kitchen was very small, a little bright cubicle inside the larger one. He put the food into the thawing cabinet, and then set the program on the cooker. The dog came in as he was doing this, and stood outside the lighted box. Once they had thawed, he put the bloody steaks down for her on a dish, and touched her ruffed head as she

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bent to eat. She was a beautiful dog, but wholly uninterested in him. She might be there in case of trouble, but there never would be trouble. No one stayed longer than six or eight months. The curatorship at the Dacha was a privilege, and an endurance test.

When his meal was ready, Tchaikov carried it to the card room or office, and ate, with the television showing him in color the black and white scenes of the snow and the cities. The card room fire burned on its synthetic logs, the gas cylinder faintly whistling. He drank vodka and red wine. Sometimes, in spaces of sound, he heard the wolves. And once, looking from the ballroom, he saw the dog, lit by all the windows, trotting along the ice below the pines.

AT MIDNIGHT, when the television stations were shut down to conserve power, and most of the lights in the cities, although not here, would be dimmed, Tchaikov got into the manually operated elevator, and went up into the second dome, to the top floor.

He had put on again his greatcoat, his hat and gloves.

The elevator stopped at another little airlock. Beyond, only the cold-pressure lights could burn, glacial blue. Sometimes they blinked, flickered. An angled stair led to a corridor, which was wide, and shone as if highly polished. At the end of the corridor was an annex and the two broad high doors of glass. It was possible to look through the glass, and for a while he stood there, in the winter of the dome, staring in like a child.

It had been and still was a bedroom, about ten meters by eleven. His flat in the city would fit easily inside it.

The bedroom had always been white, the carpets and the silken drapes, even the tassels had been a mottled white, like milk, edged with gilt. And the bed was white. So that now, just as the snow-world outside resembled a white tumbled bed, the bed was like the tumbled snow.

The long windows were black with night, but a black silvered by ice. Ice had formed too, in the room, in long spears that hung from the ceiling, where once a sky had been painted, a sky-blue sky with rosy clouds, but they had darkened and died, so now the sky was like old gray paint with flecks of rimy plaster showing through.

The mirrors in the room had cracked from the cold and formed strange

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abstract patterns that seemed to mean something. Even the glass doors had cracked, and were reinforced.

From here you could not properly see the little details of the room, the meal held perfect under ice, the ruined ornaments and paintings. Nor, properly, the couple on the bed.

Tchaikov drew the electronic key from his pocket and placed it in the mechanism of the doors. It took a long time to work, the cold-current not entirely reliable. The lighting blinked again, a whole second of black. Then the doors opened and the lights steadied, and Tchaikov went through.

The carpet, full of ice crystals, crunched under his feet, which left faint marks that would dissipate. His breath was smoke.

On a chest with painted panels, where the paint had scattered out, stood a white statue, about a meter high, that had broken from the cold, and an apple of rouged glass that had also broken, and somehow bled.

The pictures on the walls were done for. Here and there, a half of a face peeped out from the mossy corrosion, like the sun he had seen earlier in the cloud. Hothouse roses in a vase had turned to black coals, petrified, petals not fallen.

Their meal stood on the little mosaic table. It had been a beautiful meal, and neatly served. An amber fish, set with dark jade fruits, a salad that had blackened like the roses but kept its shape of dainty leaves and fronds. A flawless cream round, with two slivers cut from it, reminding him of the quartering of an elegant clock. The champagne was all gone, but for the beads of palest gold left at the bottom of the two goblets rimmed with silver. The bottle of tablets was mostly full. They had taken enough only to sleep, then turned off the heating, leaving the cold to do the rest.

The Last Supper of Love, Eynin had called it, in his poem, "This Place."

Tchaikov went over to the bed and looked down at them.

The man, Xander, wore evening dress, a tuxedo, a silk shirt with a tunic collar. On the jacket were pinned two military ribbons and a Knight's Cross. His tawny hair was sleeked back. His face was grave and very strong, a very masculine face, a very clean, calm face. His eyes, apparently, were green, but invisible behind the marble lids.

She, the woman, Tamura, was exquisite, not beautiful but immacu-

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late, and so delicate and slender. She could have danced on air, just as Eynin said, in her sequined pumps. Her long white dress clung to a slight and nearly adolescent body, with the firm full breasts of a young woman. Her brunette hair spread on the pillows with the long stream of pearls from her neck. On the middle finger of her left hand, she wore a burnished ruby the color and size of a cherry.

Like Xander, Tamura was calm, quite serene.

It seemed they had had no second thoughts, eating their last meal, drinking their wine, perhaps making love. Then swallowing the pills and lying back for the sleep of winter, the long cold that encased and preserved them like perfect candy in a globe of ice.

They had been here nine years. It was not so very long.

Tchaikov looked at them. After a few minutes he turned and went back across the room, and again his footmarks temporarily disturbed the carpet. He locked the doors behind him.

In the curator's suite below, he put on the ordinary dimmed yellow lamp, and read Eynin's poem again, sipping black tea, while the synthetic fire crackled at the foot of his hard bed.

We watched the summer palaces
Sail from this place,
Like liners to the sea
Of yesterday.

Tchaikov put the book aside and switched off the light and fire. The fire died quite slowly, as if real.

Outside he heard the wolves howling like the old factory machinery.

Behind his closed eyelids, he saw Tamura's ruby, red as the cherries and roses in the elite florist's shops of the city. Her eyes, apparently, were dark.

Above him, as he lay on his back, the lovers slept on in their bubble of loving snow.

2

The first month was not eventful. Each day, Henrique Tchaikov made a tour of the Dacha, noting any discrepancies, a fissure in the plaster, a

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chipped tile, noises in the pipes of the heating system — conscious, rather, of the fissured plaster and tiles, the thumps of the radiators, in his own apartment building. He replaced fuses and valves. In the library he noted the books which would need renovation. And took a general inventory of the stores the house had accumulated. Every curator did this. Evidently, some items were overlooked. The books, for example, the comice in the ballroom, while lavatory tissue and oil for the generator were regularly renewed.

He used the hot tub, but only every three or four days. In the city, bathing was rationed. For the same reason he did not go into the solarium, except once a week to check the thermostat and to water the extraordinary black-green plants which rose in storeys of foliage to the roof.

Most of the afternoon he sat reading in the library, or listening to the music machine. He heard, for the first time, recordings of Prokofiev and Rachmaninov playing inside their own piano concertos, and Shostakovich conducting his own symphony, and Lirabez singing, in a slightly flat but swarthy baritone, a cycle of his own songs.

For those who liked these things, the Dacha provided wonderful experiences.

Tchaikov also watched films, and the recordings of historical events.

Sometimes in the mornings he slept an hour late, letting the coffee-plate prepare a sticky brew, with thick cream from the cold room.

Usually he kept in mind these treats were his only for eight months at the most, less than a year. Then he would have to go back.

The dog became more sociable, though not exactly friendly. He stroked her fur, even brushed her twice a week. He called her Bella, because she was beautiful. Probably this was not the right thing, as again, when he left, some other person would be the curator, who might not even like dogs.

Bella, the dog, each evening lay before the fire in the card room, sometimes even in the suite. But normally she would only stay an hour or two. Then she wanted to go down through the house and out by the electronic dog-door.

He began to realize that the wolf howling was often very close to the mansion. At last he saw the indigo form of a wolf on the night snow. The wolf howled on and on, until the dog went out. Then the wolf and the dog played together in the snow.

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The first time he saw this, Tchaikov was assailed by a heart wringing pang of hope.

The house manual told him that the wolves had invaded the factory, and remained there, because they lived off the rats which still infested it. The rats in turn lived off the dung of the wolves. It was a disgusting but divinely inspired cycle. Bella and the wolf must have met out upon the frozen ice of the ancient river buried below the Dacha and the pines. Although there would be females of the wolf kind for the wolf to choose from, instead he took to Bella. An individualist. Tchaikov did not see them join in the sexual act, but he accepted that they too were lovers. This seemed to symbolize the vigor still clinging in the threatened world, its basic tenacity, its *magic*. But he put such thoughts aside. Magic was illusion. Sex was only that, just like the "hot" magazines Ouperin, or someone, had secreted in the suite, and which Tchaikov did not bother with. For him, sensuality was connected to personality. He preferred memory to invention.

Of course, occasionally he pondered Tamura and Xander, their intrinsic meaning. But never for long. And he did not go up again to look at them.

IN THE FIRST DAY of the second month, a fax came through from the city computer, informing him a party would be arriving at midday.

He shut the dog Bella in the kitchen, and put on his suit and tie.

At sixteen hours, or four o'clock — they were late, another avalanche — the party drew up in two big buses with leviathan snow tires.

Tchaikov understood he was unreasonably resentful at the stupid intrusion, for which the place was intended. He wanted the Dacha to himself. But he courteously welcomed the party, twenty-three people, who stared about the hall with wide, red-rimmed eyes, their noses running, because the heating in the buses was not very good.

They had their own guide, who led them, following Tchaikov, up the stairs to the manually operated lift. Tchaikov and the guide took them in two groups of eleven and twelve up into the dome.

They seemed frightened on the narrow stair, and in the corridor, as though extreme cold still unsettled — startled — them. They peered

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through the glass doors, exactly as Tchaikov had. When he and the bossy guide ushered them through, they wandered about the bedroom. Told not to touch anything, they made tactile motions in the air over ornaments and furnishings, with their gloved hands.

One woman, seeing the lovers, Tamura, Xander, on the bed, began to cry. No one took any notice. She pulled quantities of paper handkerchiefs from her pocket; possibly she had come prepared for emotion.

Downstairs in the ballroom, the guide lectured everybody on the Dacha. They stood glassy-eyed and blank. The significance of Tamura and Xander was elusive but overpowering. Tchaikov too did not listen. Instead he organized the coffee-plate in the card room, and brought the party coffee in relays, laced with vodka, before its return to the city in the two drafty buses.

When they had gone, about six, Bella was whining from the kitchen. He fed her quickly, knowing she wanted to be off to her lover. He gave her that night two extra steaks, in case she should want to take them out as a gift, but she left them on the plate. Oddly, from this, he deduced she would eventually desert the Dacha for her wolf partner. Instinctively she knew not to accustom him to extra food, and to prepare herself for future hardship. But doubtless this was fanciful. Besides, she might by now be pregnant with the wolf's children.

Bella lay before the synthetic log fire, her gold eyes burning golden-red. Her belly looked more full than it had. It was about twenty-two hours, ten o'clock.

Tchaikov read aloud to her from the poem "This Place."

I dreamed once, of this place.
When I was young.
But then I woke —
When I was young.

It was five nights since the bus party had visited. Once the dog had got up, shaken herself, and padded from the room, Tchaikov went upstairs and stepped into the elevator.

The night was extra cold, minus several more degrees on the gauge, and the great bedroom had a silvery fog in it.

He could look at the couple now quite passively, as if they were only

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waxworks. A man and a woman who had not wanted to remain inside the sinking winter world. But was it merely that? Was their mystical suicide cowardice — or bravura? Did they think, in dying, that they had somewhere warm to go?

The Bureau had not advanced any records on them, and probably their names were not even those they had gone by in life:

Again, he asked himself what they meant. But it did not really matter. They *were*, that was all.

In the night, about four A.M., an unearthly noise woke him from a deep sleep, where he had been dreaming of swimming in a warm sea jeweled by fish.

The sound had occurred outside, he thought, outside both the dream and the room. He got up and went to the window, and looked out through the triple glazing which was all the suite provided.

The snowscape spread from the pines, along the plain, and in the distance billowed up to the higher land, and the black sky massed with the broken edges of stars. Far away to the right, where the plain was its most level and long, a black mark had appeared in the snow. It must stretch for nearly twenty meters, he thought, a jagged, ink-black *crack* in the terrain.

Tchaikov stared, and saw a vapor rising out of the crack, caused by the disparity between the bitter set of the air and some different temperature below.

The sound had *been* a crack. Like a gigantic piece of wood snapped suddenly in half — a bark of breakage.

But new snow was already drifting faintly down from the stars, smoothing and obscuring the black tear in the whiteness. As Tchaikov watched, it began to vanish.

Probably it was nothing. In the city apertures sometimes appeared in the top-snow of streets, where thermolated pipes still ran beneath. Somebody had told Tchaikov there had been a river here, passing below the house. The driver had mentioned it too. Perhaps the disturbance had to do with that.

Tchaikov went back to bed, and lay for a while listening, expectant and tensed. Then he recalled that once, in his early childhood, he had heard such a crack roar out across a frozen lake in the country. Instinc-

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tively, hearing it now, he had unconsciously remembered the springs of long-ago, the waxing of the sun, the rains, the melting of the ice. But spring was forever over.

He drifted back down into sleep, numb and calm.

The next morning, as he was coming from the solarium, having switched off the sprinklers, he heard the sound of a vehicle on the plain. He went into the ballroom and looked down at the snow, half noticing as he did so that the curious mark of the previous night had completely disappeared. A large black car was now parked by the Dacha's steps, near the statues. After a moment, Tchaikov recognized the car which had brought him here. Puzzled, he waited, and saw the driver, Argenty, get out, and then a smaller figure in a long coat of gray synthetic fur.

They came up the steps, Argenty pausing for the smaller figure, which was that of a woman.

After a minute the house door made a noise.

There had been no communication from the city computer, but sometimes messages were delayed. In any case, you could not leave them standing in the cold.

Tchaikov opened the door without interrogation. Argenty shot him a quick look under his hat.

"It's all right, isn't it?"

"I expect so," said Tchaikov.

He let them come in, and the door shut.

Argenty took off his hat, and stood almost to attention. He said, "There aren't visitors due, are there?"

"Not that I know of."

"I thought not. There's been another power failure. I shouldn't think anyone would be going anywhere today."

"Apart from you."

"Yes," said Argenty. He turned, and looked at the woman.

She too had taken off her hat, a fake fur shako to match the coat. She had a small pale slender face, without, he thought, any makeup beyond a dusting of powder. Her eyes were dark and smoky, with long lashes of a lighter darkness. Her dark hair seemed recently washed and brushed and fell in soft waves to her shoulders. Just under her right cheekbone had been

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applied a little diamanté flower. She met his eyes and touched the flower with a gloved fingertip. She said quietly, "A frostbite scar."

"This is my wife," said Argenty. "Tanya."

Then she smiled at Tchaikov, a placating smile, like a child's when it wants to show it is undeserving of punishment. She was like a child, a girl, despite the two thin lines cut under her large eyes and at either side of her soft mouth.

He remembered how Argenty had talked on and on about her, her light-deprived Twilight Sickness, her wanderings in the night and cries. She had been lovely, he said, twenty years ago. In a way she still was.

Unauthorized, they should not be here. It could cost Argenty a serious demotion. What had happened? The power failure? The electricity off in their flat, gloom, and the refrigerator failing, and Argenty saying, Leave all that, I'll take you somewhere nice. As you might, to stop a miserable and frightened child crying.

Tchaikov said, "Come into the card room. There's a fire."

They went through with him, Argenty still stiff and formal, absolutely knowing what he had risked, but she was all smiles now, reassured.

In the warm room, Argenty removed his greatcoat, and helped her off with her fur. Tchaikov looked at them, slightly surprised. Argenty wore the uniform of his city service, with an honor ribbon pinned by the collar. While she — she wore a long, old evening gown of faded pastel crimson, which left her shoulders and arms and some of her white back and breast bare. On her left hand, under the woolen glove, was another little glove of lace. She indicated it again at once, laughed and said, "Frostbite. I've been careless, you see."

Tchaikov switched on the coffee-plate. He said, "I usually have lunch in about an hour. I hope you'll join me."

Argenty nodded politely. She began to walk about the room, inspecting the antique oil paintings and the restored damask wall covering. Argenty took out a brand of expensive cigarettes and came to Tchaikov, offering them.

Argenty murmured, very low, "Thank you, for being so good. I can't tell you what it means to her."

"That's all right. You may even get away with it, if the computer's out."

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Argenty shrugged. "Perhaps. What does it matter anyway?"

After the coffee, Tchaikov showed them the ballroom, then went to organize a lunch. He selected caviar and pork, the type of vegetables and little side dishes he did not, himself, bother with, fruit and biscuits, and a chocolate dessert he thought she would like. He took vodka and two bottles of champagne from the liquor compartment. For God's sake, they might as well enjoy the visit.

He opened up the parlor off the ballroom. It too had a chandelier dripping prisms. He turned on the fire and lit the tall white candles in the priceless candelabra. He was not supposed to do this. But against Argenty's tremendous gamble it was a small gesture.

Everything sparkled in the room. It was now only like an overcast snowy winter day in the country. Perhaps before some festival. And the lunch was like a celebration.

Argenty ate doggedly, drank quite sparingly. She ate only a little, but with interest, excitement. She sparkled up like the room, her personal lights switched on.

In the middle of the meal, the dog, Bella, came padding in, her coat thick with rime and water drops. Tchaikov got up, thinking Tanya would be afraid of the dog. But Tanya only laughed with delight, and went straight to Bella, ruffling her fur, and drying her inadequately with linen napkins from the table.

As Bella stood before the fire, and the slight woman made a fuss of her, Tchaikov could see the swelling shape of the dog's belly, her extended nipples. She was definitely pregnant from the wolf. And the girl-woman bent shining over her, caressing and stroking, kissing the big animal on the savage velvet of her brow.

Argenty said, "Tanya used to live on a farm. They had dogs, cats, horses, everything."

Tanya said, lightly, "I came to the city to sell stockings. Isn't that ridiculous."

When the meal was finished, they drew the large chairs to the fireside. They sat drinking coffee and brandy, and the dog lay between them, glistening gold along her back from the fire.

Outside, the dusk of the afternoon seemed only seasonal through the openings of the heavy drapes.

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They were sleepy, muttering little anecdotes of their pasts, quite divorced from their present. In the end, Tanya fell asleep, her head gracefully drooping, a lock of her hair like dark tinsel on her cheek.

"When she wakes up," said Argenty, "we'll be going."

"Why don't you stay tonight?" said Tchaikov. "Leave early in the morning. There's another bedroom in the suite. Quite a good one — I think it's for visiting VIPS. By tomorrow the power failure will be over, probably."

"That's kind...you've been kind...but we'd better get back."

They looked at the sleeping woman, at the sleeping dog, and the fire.

"Why did this happen?" asked Argenty. His voice was gentle and unemphatic. "Couldn't they have seen — why did they give up all the best things, let them go — they could have — something — surely — "

Tchaikov said nothing, and Argenty fell silent.

And in the silence there came a dense low rumble.

For a moment Tchaikov took it for some fluctuation of the gas jet in the fire, and then, as it grew louder, for the noise of snow dislodged and tumbling from a roof of the mansion.

But then the rumbling became very loud, running in toward them over the plain.

"What is it?" said Argenty. He had gone pale.

"I don't know. An earth tremor, perhaps."

The rumbling was now so vehement he had to raise his voice. On the table the silver and the glasses tinkled and rattled, something fell and broke, and on the walls the pictures trembled and swayed. The floor beneath their chairs was churning.

The dog had woken, sat up, her coat bristling and ears laid flat, a white ring showing round each eye.

Argenty and Tchaikov rose, and in her sleep the woman stretched out one hand, in its lace glove, as if to snatch hold of something.

Then came a thunderclap, a sort of ejection of sound that ripped splintering from earth and sky, hit the barrier of the house, exploded, dropped back in enormous echoing shards.

The windows grated and shook. No doubt some of the external glass had ruptured.

"Is it a bomb?" cried Argenty.

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Tanya had started from sleep and the chair, and he caught her in his arms. She was speechless with shock and terror. The dog was growling.

"I don't know. It's stopped now. Not a bomb, I think. There was no light flash." Tchaikov moved to the door. "Stay here."

Outside, he ran across the ballroom, and to the nearer window which looked out to the plain.

What he saw made him hesitate mentally, stumble in his mind, at a loss. He could not decipher what he was looking at. It was a sight theoretically familiar enough. Yet knowing what it was, he stood immobile for several minutes, staring without comprehension at the enormous coal-black dragon which had crashed upward through the dead ice of the frozen river, showering off panes of the marble land, like the black and white concrete blocks of a collapsed building. In the puddle of bubbling iron water, the submarine settled now, tall, motionless, less than thirty-five meters beyond the Dacha, while clouds of stony steam rose in a tumult on the steel sky.

3

THEY MARCHED STEADILY to the mansion, over the snow. Henrique Tchaikov watched them come, black shapes on the whiteness.

Reaching the steps, they climbed them, and arrived at the door. He could see their uniforms by then, the decorations of rank and authority. They did not seem to feel the cold. They did not bother with the buzzer.

He spoke through the door apparatus.

"You must identify yourselves."

"You'll let us in." The one who spoke then gave a key word and number. And Tchaikov opened the door.

The cold gushed in with them, in a special way.

"You're the current Bureau man," said the commander to Tchaikov. He was about thirty-six, athletic, tanned by a solarium, his hair cut too short, not a pore in his face. His teeth were winter white. "We won't give you much trouble. We've come for the couple."

Tchaikov did not answer. His heart kicked, but it was a reflex. He

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stood very still. He had taken Tanya and Argenty down to the kitchen, with the dog, and shut them all in.

The commander vocalized again. "We don't need any red tape, do we? My men will go straight up. It'll only take the briefest while. The dome, right?"

Tchaikov said slowly, "You mean Tamura and Xander."

"Are those the names? Yes. The pair in the state bedroom. Here's the confirmation disc."

Tchaikov accepted the disc and put it in the analyzer by the door. After ten seconds an affirmative lit up, the key number, and the little message: *Comply with all conditions.* The commander took back his disc. "Where would we be," he said, "without our machines." Then he gave an order, and the four other men ran off and up the stair, like hounds let from a leash, toward the upper floors and the elevator. Obviously they had been primed with the layout of the mansion. Tchaikov saw that two of them carried each a rolled rain-colored thermolated bag. They would have some means of opening the upper doors.

He said, "Why are you taking them away? Where are they going?"

The commander showed all his pristine, repulsive teeth. "Quite a comfortable stint here, I'd say, yes? Don't worry, they won't recall you until your time's up. Messes up the files. Seven months to go. You can just relax."

Tchaikov grasped it would be useless to question the commander further. He had had his orders, which were to remove the frozen lovers in cold-bags, take them into the submarine, go away with them, somewhere.

Tchaikov said, "It was impressive, the way you surfaced."

"That river," said the commander, "it runs deep. So far down, you know, the water still moves. We came in from the sea, thirteen kilometers. Must have given you a surprise."

"Yes."

"There's nothing like her," said the commander, as though he boasted about a selected woman, or his mother. "The X 2 M's. Ice-breakers, power-hives. Worlds in themselves. You'd be amazed. We could stay under for a hundred years. We have everything. Clean reusable air, foolproof heating, cuisine prepared by master chefs, games rooms, weaponry. See how brown I am," he added, dancing his narrow eyes, flirting now. "Have you ever tasted eggs?"

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"No."

"I have one every day. And fresh meat. Salads. My little boat has everything I'll ever need."

There was a wooden, flat sound, repeated on and on.

The commander frowned.

"It's only the dog," Tchaikov said. "I shut her in, below. In case she annoyed you."

"Dog? Oh, yes. Animals don't interest me, except of course to eat."

Tchaikov thought he heard the lift cranking up the tower, going to the dome.

The commander looked about now, and laughed at the old regal house, the old country Dacha with its sleeping, white-candy dead.

Then stood in silence in the hall, until the other four men ran down again, carrying, not particularly cautiously, the two thermolated bags, upright and unpliable. Filled and out of the dome, the material had misted over. Tchaikov could not see Tamura or Xander in these cocoons, although he found himself staring, thinking for a second he caught the scorch of her ruby ring.

"Well done," the commander said to him. "All over." It was like the dentists in childhood. "You can go back to all those cozy duties." He grinned at Tchaikov. But his use of jargon was somehow unwieldy and out of date. Did they speak another tongue on the submarine? "A nice number. Happy days."

The dog had suddenly stopped barking.

The door let the men out. Tchaikov watched them returning over the snow, toward their black dragon-whale. Already the ice was forming round the submarine's casing, but that would not be much of an inconvenience. He wondered where they had been, how far out in jet black seas, where maybe fish still swam. When the vessel was gone, the ice would swiftly close, and tonight's fresh snowfall heal the wound it had made as snow had healed the preface to the wound, last night.

Tamura and Xander, preserved from the submarine's warmth in some refrigerated cubicle. He did not know, could not imagine for what purpose. Although the nagging line from some book — was it a Bible? — began to twitter in his head...*And He said: Make thee an ark* —

Above, the dome was void. The great polar room with its stalactites of ice, the footsteps already smoothing from the carpet.

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He descended quickly to the kitchen. He had told Argenty where the medicine cabinet was, and suggested that he dial some sedative tablets for his wife. Tchaikov was unsure what he would find.

Yet when he reached the lower floor, there was only quietness. Opening the kitchen door, he found the two of them seated urbanely at the long table.

The dog Bella had gone. But Tanya sat in her red dress, and looking up, she met Tchaikov only with her lambent eyes.

She said to him, reciting from memory from Éynin's poem that he too knew so well:

In Hell the birds are made of fire;
If all the birds of Hell flew to this place,
And settled on the snow,
Still darkness would prevail,
And utter cold.

"She knows it by heart," said Argenty.

"So do I, most of it," Tchaikov answered.

"The dog went out," said Argenty. "We thought we heard a wolf."

"Yes. They've mated."

The kitchen was bathed in vague ochre heat, only the light of the new cooking area was raw and too bright.

Tanya's eyes shone.

"You were very good, to hide us away."

"It's all right," he said. "The military are shortsighted. They came for something else."

In a while they heard the strange, sluggish hollow suction of the submarine, its motors, diving down again below the ice. The house gave now only a little shudder, and on its shelf one ancient plate turned askew.

Tanya laughed. She lifted her dark springy hair in her hands.

Tchaikov saw that Argenty's hair, under the polishing light, was a rich dull gold.

He slept a deep leaden sleep, and dreamed of the submarine. It was taller than the tallest architecture of the city, the Bureau building. It clove forward, black, ice and steam and boiling water spraying away from it, rending the land with a vicious hull like the blade of some enormous ice-skate. In

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the dark sky above, red and yellow burning birds wheeled to and fro, cawing and calling, striking sparks from the clouds. The birds of Hell.

When the submarine reached the Dacha, it stopped just outside the wall of the suite, which in the dream was made of glass. The wall shattered and fell down, and looking up the mile of iron, steel and night that was the tower of the submarine, Tchaikov noticed a tiny bluish porthole set abnormally in the side, and there they sat, the lovers, gazing down with cold, closed eyes.

Waking, he got up and made black tea on the plate. From the other bedroom of the suite, across the inner room, came no sound. When he looked out, there was no longer a light beneath their door. If they had switched off the optional lamp, perhaps they slept.

When the afternoon darkened, they had sat on with him in the kitchen, drinking a little, talking idly. There was the subtle ease of remaining; he realized before Argenty asked, that they did after all mean to stay a night at the house.

Later the dog came in again. Tchaikov fed her. She lay by the hot pipes for half an hour before going out once more.

During the interval, Tanya suddenly sang a strange old song in her light girl's voice, "Oh my dog is such a clever dog — "

Bella listened. Her tail wagged slowly. She came to Tanya to be caressed before padding off into the star-spiked night.

They ate cold pork and bread for supper and finished the champagne. Argenty thanked Tchaikov, shaking his hand, throwing his arm around him. The girl-woman did not kiss Tchaikov as he had half expected — hoped? — she would. She only said shyly, "It's been a wonderful day. Better than a birthday."

By the time he concluded his nocturnal check of the Dacha, they had gone up, and just the lamp showed softly under the door.

But they were in full darkness now, so Tchaikov walked almost on tiptoe from the suite. He did not want to wake them if they slept. He wished her not to dream as he had, of the triumphant submarine.

Outside, the ice had superficially closed over again. Snow fell in gentle pitiless flakes.

The elevator seemed particularly sluggish. He had to work at the lever with great firmness.

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Above, in the icy corridor, Tchaikov shivered, only his trousers and greatcoat on over his nightshirt. As he walked toward the glass doors, he had a sense of imminence. What was it? Was it loss?

As formerly, he hesitated, and stood at the doors, staring in through the glacial light, the glacial glass, the cracks, the fog of ice.

He experienced a moment of dislocation, pure bewilderment, just as he had with the submarine. He had previously seen the bed clothed by two forms. Now they were removed and the bed was vacant. But there were two forms on the bed.

The bed was clothed.

Tchaikov opened the doors with the electronic key they had so noiselessly replaced on the chest in his room, before going up again. Of course, the key, lying there, had been obvious for what it was. Like the house map in the card room. There would have been no difficulty in deciding.

The bedroom, when he entered it now, did not strike him as so frozen. The breath of the living seemed finally to have stirred it, like the fluid of the deepest coldest pool, stirred by a golden wand.

Tchaikov went across to the bed. Two bottles had fallen on the thick carpet. He looked down, at the couple.

They lay hand in hand, side by side. Their faces were peaceful, almost smiling, the eyes fast shut. Like the faces, the eyes, of Xander and Tamura. Yet these two lovers had needed to be brave. Despite the vodka they had swallowed and the tablets from the medicine cabinet, they had had to face the cold, had had to lie down in the cold. He in his well-brushed uniform with its single honor, and she in her pale red sleeveless gown.

But there had been no struggle. They seemed to have found it very simple, very consoling, if not easy. Perhaps it had been easy, too.

Her somber hair, his gilded hair, both smoked now by the rime. And on the diamanté flower that gemmed her cheek, a single mote of crystal like a tear.

Tchaikov backed slowly and carefully away. It was possible they were not quite dead yet, still in the process of dying. He tiptoed out, not to disturb their death.

By the end of the ninth month, when the Bureau at last recalled him, the dog was long gone. He had seen her at first sometimes, out on the

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snow, playing with the wolf and their three pups. But the wolf was a king wolf, made her queen over the wolf pack, and in the end, she went away to the factory with them.

When he heard the howling in the still night, he thought of her. Once, the moon appeared incredibly for a quarter of an hour, sapphire blue, and the wolves' chanting rose to a crescendo. Her children would be very strong, cross-bred from an alpha male and such a well-nourished mother.

His faxed report had been acknowledged, but that was all. Tchaikov never commented upon or thought about the aspects of what had occurred, he detailed and visualized the events only in memorized images.

The night of the blue moon, which was two nights before his return to the city, and to his cramped flat with its thudding radiators, the tepid bath once a week, the rationing, the dark, he wrote in the back of the book of Eynin's poetry, on the blank page which followed the poem called "The Place."

Here too he set out the facts sparely, as he had done for the Bureau. Under the facts he wrote a few further lines.

"I have puzzled all this time over what is their meaning, the lovers in the ice, whoever they are, whether right or wrong in their action, and even if they change, their bodies constantly taken and replaced by others. And I think their meaning is this: Love, courage, defiance — the mystery of the human spirit, still blooming, always blooming, like the last flower in the winter world."

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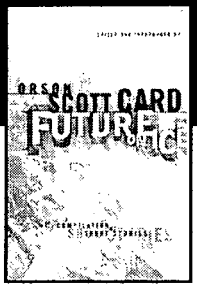

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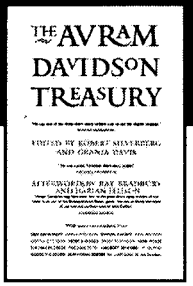

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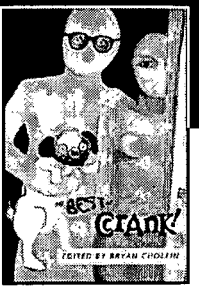

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

I FIND IT hard to believe, but this is already the fiftieth installment of this column since I took it over from Scott Card a few years ago. When I look back at the manuscript pages of all those columns, I see it's thick enough to make up a novel, albeit a shorter one than I normally write.

Still, I mention this only in passing. Since I'm not much of a one for celebrating milestones and the like, it's going to be business as usual for this half-centennial column — but business as usual includes some fine recent publications. First up:

Irrational Fears, by William Browning Spencer, White Wolf, 1998, $19.99

Long-time readers of this column will remember my waxing enthusiastic over Spencer's last novel, *Zod Wallop*, a few years ago (*F&SF*, January 1996). What delighted me so much about that book is repeated in this new one: Spencer offers us something entirely original, a novel both serious and funny, beautifully written, a delight and a wonder, a true gift.

Heady praise? Well, yes. But I'll stand by it for these two books. Like the best of Jonathan Carroll's work, Spencer's fiction gives us a fresh worldview, taking the elements that make a good fantasy novel to places no one else has thought to go. In *Zod Wallop* it was a children's book author discovering that the invented story in his book was spilling over into his real life and coming true — not the most original conceit, I'll admit, but oh, what Spencer does with it. In *Irrational Fears*, we learn that alcoholism might well be an ancient alien curse, the hallucinations drunks see being actual glimpses of other-dimensional demons.

Our viewpoint character for the new novel is Jack Lowry, an ex-college professor whose acquaintance we make in a detox unit.

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Lowry has been there before, and probably will be there again. But this time he volunteers for an experimental course of addiction therapy, in part because of his infatuation with another inmate, Kerry Bracket. But things quickly go from bad to worse as Lowry and his fellow inmates come under attack by a cult known as The Clear.

It would take far too much space to explain all the ins and outs of the diverse plot lines and how they affect the various characters. But, as he did in *Zod Wallop*, Spencer manages to be both serious and hilarious, keeping readers on the edge of their seats, then making them fall off for laughing.

Now addiction is a serious matter, but if you've become a little tired of the ever-growing library of earnest — and often far too chipper — fictional accounts of how all it takes is a plucky will and strength of character to overcome one's chemical or alcoholic dependencies, this might be the book for you. Spencer doesn't mock the disease, nor the suffering it can bring into our lives. He even presents a somewhat coherent history of Alcoholics Anonymous. But he's also willing to pursue the more ludicrous elements of some recovery and self-help programs, and he's not afraid to add a few real Lovecraftian monsters to the stew.

Avoid only if black humor upsets you.

Harvest Tales & Midnight Revels, edited by Michael Mayhew, Bald Mountain Books, 1998, $23.95/$14.95

It's Halloween, and you feel you should do something to commemorate the day, but you're too old to go trick-or-treating, and getting all decked out in a costume just doesn't give you the buzz it once did. So what do you do? Well, you could try getting together with a group of friends and have everyone bring along an original story or poem to read over the course of the evening. The only rule would be that the story would have to relate, in some way, to Halloween.

Sounds too complicated? That it wouldn't work?

I suppose it depends on your friends.

When Michael Mayhew decided to throw his first Halloween story party in 1985, he had no idea the tradition would go for as long as it has. The first party was popular, but what was really surprising was how good the stories got over the years. And they are good, as readers will discover from this compilation culled from some eighty stories written over a period of ten years. Some are serious, some humorous.

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Some are poignant, or sexy, or — these *are* Halloween stories, after all — downright creepy.

The authors aren't — or weren't at the time — professional fiction writers. But they were a creative group: graphic artists, screenwriters, filmmakers, editors, actors, musicians, and the like. I don't know what the overall quality of the stories was, but the ones collected here are all readable, and some are truly outstanding, which is more than you can say for most anthologies these days.

Want to give it a try yourself? Editor Mayhew includes a very useful, and sensible, guide to throwing your own party in the collection's afterward. By the time you read this, it will probably be too late to put that advice into use this year. So for now, enjoy the material Mayhew has collected for us, and start planning your own party for next year.

If your local bookshop can't get it for you, write to: Bald Mountain Books, P.O. Box 8420, Van Nuys, CA 91409.

In the Rift: Glenraven II, by Marion Zimmer Bradley & Holly Lisle, Baen, 1998, $21.

Bradley and Lisle's latest collaboration is a guilty pleasure, such as those Michelle West used to write about in a column for this same magazine a few years ago. *In the Rift* is a fairly straightforward story of a woman from our world who gets mixed up with otherworldly nastiness, resulting in the usual banding together of a rag-tag group of adventurers who have to go off and save the day. What's fun about this particular version of the story is that, for the most part, the action takes place in our world.

It starts when Kate Beacham finds a Fodors-styled guide book to some place named Glenraven. She's never heard of the place, never seen the book before. But when she opens it up, the words, "Get out of the house, *quick*," appear on the page. The next thing she knows, she's out on her front porch with a shotgun, defending her house from a flying creature that looks like a cross between a dragon and a shark.

Beacham's already had a hard day. She lives in a small town where she's being persecuted for being Wiccan. Earlier that same evening, she was assaulted by masked bigots, then when she did get home, it was to find her beloved horse dead on her driveway with a note next to it, reading "YoU'Re nExt." Now she's got this otherworldly *thing* flying at her.

She manages to kill the monstrous beast, but then finds herself

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playing host to a quartet of human-like beings from a parallel world who were dragged into our world in the wake of the beast. The only way for them to get back is to capture this wizard, who also happens to have extremely unpleasant plans in mind for our world.

What makes the book work is not simply the fast pace and inventive magical elements, but the characterization, especially of Beacham. We're rooting for her all the way as she takes charge of her squabbling, otherworldly visitors and deals with her own ongoing problems with bigotry. There's real growth in her character, an awareness that all these traumatic events take their toll. But it's not heavy-handed, and it never bogs down the story.

My only real question is, what does the buxom woman on the cover have to do with the book? And, considering how most of the action takes place in the southern states, what's with all the snow? It's too bad Baen couldn't have commissioned a new piece of art to go on the book, one that actually has something to do with the story, instead of using what's obviously a piece of stock art.

The Lost Coast, by Steven Nightingale, St. Martin's Griffin, 1997, $11.95

The Thirteenth Daughter of the Moon, by Steven Nightingale, St. Martin's Press, 1997, $23.95

I wanted to like these books much more than I was able to. They sounded like great fun from the cover blurbs — which gave me a sense of, say, Tom Robbins meets *Moll Flanders*, or perhaps *Giles Goat-Boy*, by way of the Wild West — but they didn't quite deliver.

The cast we first meet in *The Lost Coast* is certainly entertaining: a cowgirl named Cookie, and Juha, a shy building contractor who's built along the lines of Paul Bunyon; the artist Renato and his first true love, Ananda, who's now a lawyer; the professor Chiara and her daughter Izzy, who are being pursued by private detectives from out East; and Muscovado, a journalist from Jamaica. They all pair off rather quickly in a bar in Eureka, Nevada, except for Renato who remains thoroughly absorbed with his art until he meets the Twelfth Daughter of the Moon, later in the book.

There's a grand sense of the tall tale pervading the trusty band's adventures as they leave Eureka, heading west for the mythical Lost Coast. Along the way they meet junkyard angels, a woman whose step-son is a lightning bolt, a talk-

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ing coyote, an *endlessly* talking peacock, and the like. They also partake of vast quantities of great food and sex, in between philosophical conversations and just plain tomfoolery.

All of which is good fun, and even thought-provoking at times. And Nightingale writes well. The trouble is, he can't plot for the life of him. That's not necessarily the end of the world, because he certainly makes up for the lack of a straightforward storyline with any number of other entertainments. But it does cause a couple of problems.

The first is that, interspersed with what I've discussed above are sections from the points of view of a couple of murderous, body-building, amoral teenagers who appear — at least to this reader — to be present simply to lend some sort of plot/tension to the proceedings with less than happy results. Except for the satiric fun Nightingale pokes at society in general, and gun lovers and the media in particular, it's wasted space and doesn't really match the feel of the rest of the novel.

The second problem is that the subsequent book, *The Thirteenth Daughter of the Moon*, suffers because it's really no different from the first book — by which I mean it's simply a continuation of the same. Where it's fresh and funny and engaging in the earlier book, it becomes a little tired the second time around.

Which is a pity, because for all its meandering and wandering about, not to mention enormous digressions, *The Lost Coast* is a good read. Much of it carries the flavor and tradition of folk tale and the exaggerated yarns that gather around mythic characters such as John Henry, Paul Bunyon, or Johnny Appleseed — ribald trysts and preposterous excursions that are impossible to ignore. But one can't help but wish there was a little more meat to the proceedings, especially by the time we get to the second book.

Try these from the library first before shelling out your hard-earned cash for your own copies.

Dispossession, by Chaz Brenchley, New English Library, 1997, £5.99

Chaz Brenchley's name has come up a few times in the past few years — arising during discussions of favorite books with other readers — but I've never had the chance to try him until I finally stumbled across a couple of his books in a local bookshop. *Dead of Light* and *Light Errant* are the usual touchstones I've been given, but I decided

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to try the stand-alone *Dispossession*. The setup is wonderful:

A lawyer wakes up in a hospital from a three-day coma after a major accident in a vehicle he doesn't remember ever driving, never mind owning, to discover that he's lost three months of his life. During those missing months, he's left the law firm where he was employed to go to work for a major-league criminal he has always disliked, he's left a seven-year-old relationship and married a (to him) complete stranger, and people are trying to kill him. He doesn't know why any of the above have taken/is taking place.

And, oh yes, he also happens to know a fallen angel named Luke.

I love this sort of a book, where the protagonist has no idea who he is (or in this case, why he has undertaken these inexplicable changes in his life), but he has to find out quickly, or he's dead. Shades of Robert Ludlum, or the opening gambit in Roger Zelazny's classic Amber series.

Often in such books, when the mystery finally begins to unravel and sense is brought to the dangerously unexplained, it's a bit of a letdown. But not so here. Brenchley plays fair, ladling out the surprises and explanations with a sure, deft hand. The characters have resonance and depth, and his prose is both literate and eminently suited to a page-turning thriller. And his handling of a fallen angel is dealt with beautifully — Luke is a powerful, alien being, never fully explained, but fully realized.

When I got to the end of *Dispossession*, I immediately wanted to start another of his books, but alas, they do take some tracking down — especially in the States, I should imagine. But if the above intrigues you, you might try a dealer who handles UK books, or one of the on-line book services, as I will be doing to acquire some of his seven other books. On the basis of this novel — *Dispossession* is one of those increasingly rare books that remind you just how satisfying fiction can be — I doubt you'll be disappointed.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Pulp Art: Original Cover Paintings for the Great American Pulp Magazines, by Robert Lesser, Gramercy Books, 1997, $19.99

Pulp Culture: The Art of Fiction Magazines, by Frank M. Robinson and Lawrence Davidson, Collectors Press, 1998, $39.95

Infinite Worlds: The Fantastic Visions of Science Fiction Art, by Vincent di Fate, Penguin Gallery, 1997, $45.00

YOU'RE reading this on the pages of one of the last remaining descendants of the "pulp" magazines (so named for the cheap paper on which they were printed). The pulps in their day were bestsellers: one of the principal forms of popular fictional entertainment. In their time, roughly the first half of the century, there were hundreds of these pulps available on the newsstands — *Amazing Stories, The Black Mask, Argosy, Western Romances, Spicy Mystery Stories* — and millions of people across the country bought them for 10, 15, sometimes 25 cents, to lose themselves in the stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Max Brand, Talbot Mundy, Otis Adelbert Kline, and thousands of other writers (some remembered, most long forgotten). Many of sf's greatest names got their starts in the pulps: Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, C. L. Moore, A. E. van Vogt, L. Sprague de Camp, Theodore Sturgeon. Some spent their whole careers there — H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Henry Kuttner. The pulps were the cauldron in which most of the genres we know today — mystery, sf, horror, crime, western, romance — took form.

While names such as Edgar Rice Burroughs could have a magazine hopping off the stands, what really sold the pulps month in and month out were the covers. Colorful, striking, and imaginative, often lurid

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and sometimes even offensive, pulp covers competed for the prospective reader's eye in bright reds and yellows, with blazing guns, dashing heroes, and scantily clad heroines. As one pulp editor put it, "gaudy covers do sell the magazines, and...this is the most important thing any publisher considers." It's this world — the world of the pulp artists — that Robert Lesser and his various contributors examine in *Pulp Art*. Science fiction, fantasy, and horror were just a small part of the pulp field, and consequently Lesser devotes only one chapter (albeit the first) to the sf pulps such as *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Wonder Stories*, and their ilk. Subsequent chapters cover the detective pulps (*The Shadow*, *Doc Savage*, *The Spider*, *Detective Story Magazine*, etc.), aviation, war, and western pulps (*Fighting Aces*, *Battle Birds*, *Wild West Weekly*, etc.), and genres which appeared in a variety of more and less specialized magazines, such as adventure stories (Tarzan appeared in such pulps as *Argosy* and *Blue Book*, which printed other sorts of fiction as well) and "ladies in peril," a motif found on the covers of almost every pulp magazine, from *Ace Detective* and *Weird Tales* to the more single-minded "spicy" mags, such as *Spicy Western Stories*, *Spicy Mystery*, and others.

To a large extent, Lesser focuses on each artwork distinct from the magazine on which it was used; indeed, Lesser is so interested in highlighting the art in its own right that, wherever possible, he reproduces the original paintings themselves, free of the type and other elements that were added to form the final cover. Each chapter ends with several full-page reproductions that reveal the true grandeur of the work: Margaret Brundage's sleek female figures, Rudolph Belarski's kinetic war scenes, Frederick Blakeslee's swooping biplanes, Frank R. Paul's wacky alien cities, and J. Allen St. John's incomparable images of high adventure. Free of distracting type, and in their full colors (which were sometimes muted by the reproduction process on the magazine covers), the art of the pulps emerges as *art*, not simply as the marketing tool it was born to be.

After flipping through these pages, the reader's heart breaks to learn how few original paintings from the period have survived — of perhaps 50,000 individual covers produced during the pulp years, only about one percent of the originals

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have been recovered. The main reason for this, Lesser tells us, lies in the nature of the business: these artists didn't think of themselves as such, and often they were ashamed of the work they did for the pulps. Some, such as John Newton Howitt (known in his time as the "Dean of Weird Menace Art" for his covers of *Horror Stories*, *Terror Tales*, and other scary pulps), may even have destroyed their originals themselves. Others simply never asked for them back from the publishers; and, often enough, the publishers couldn't even give them away. Even decades later, most pulp artists weren't interested in their original paintings. When Street & Smith, one of the biggest pulp publishers, was sold to Condé Nast in 1961 and needed to clear out their warehouse space, they called the artists to see if they wanted their work back. Most said no. Street & Smith tried to auction the paintings off, but there was no interest. They told their employees they could have any they liked — free — but still very few were taken. In the end, hundreds or even thousands of paintings ended up on the street to be hauled away with the garbage.

Lesser's concentration on the original art does have the drawback of limiting his pool of examples — since so few original paintings survived, he can't necessarily select the very best or most representative pieces, and some of the pulp fringe — such as *Zeppelin Stories*, of which I'll say more soon — aren't noted at all. *Pulp Art* is by no means an exhaustive survey of the subject — nor does it mean to be. Lesser's text, likewise, makes no attempt at an extensive history of the pulps or the artists who worked for them. Nevertheless, his astute analysis — and the short essays contributed by such experts as Roger T. Reed (director of the Illustration House gallery), the late sf historian Sam Moskowitz, John de Soto (son of pulp artist Rafael de Soto), and Bruce Cassidy (editor of western pulps in the late 1940s) — make for a good introduction. Sometimes Lesser's suggestions are off — as in his identification of the Biblical Adam as a literary precursor of Tarzan — but for the most part his discussion of pulp art and iconography rings true. He points out pulp art's conceptual roots in the "storytelling" art of earlier eras, especially in depictions of the Crucifixion and saintly martyrdoms, as well as similarities to near-contemporary works by such artists as Winslow Homer. Wisely, Lesser stops short of pressing his point too far — he's not arguing

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that pulp art and "fine" art are indistinguishable. What he does argue for are pulp art's virtues on its own terms, and the acknowledgment of the craftsmanship and (yes) artistry of its creators. No one can emerge from *Pulp Art* doubting any of that.

Pulp Culture by collectors Frank M. Robinson and Lawrence Davidson certainly overlaps the territory of *Pulp Art* — it even includes some of the same images — but the similarities remain superficial. Robinson and Davidson approach their subject from the perspective of collectors (each illustration has a bullet ranking to indicate the relative value of the issue it depicts), and they take a much broader view, as their title implies. Here we have not only pulp art, but the whole pulp experience on display. Robinson and Davidson produce a more thorough (though still hardly exhaustive) history of the pulps, their publishers, writers, artists, and readers, and they offer a much larger gathering of illustrations — more than 400 cover shots alone. Read — or surveyed; these books invite browsing more than a straight read-through — after Lesser's, *Pulp Culture* expands and enriches an appreciation of the pulp era.

Like Lesser, Robinson and Davidson divide their text into chapters, here along the lines of literary genres more than artistic imagery. Sf pulps hold an even smaller place here than they did in *Pulp Art* — 16 pages out of more than 200, though that's about the average for each chapter. Along with the detective, western, and war pulps that Lesser showed us, we glimpse the sex and romance pulps (*Range Romances, Breezy Stories, All-Story Love Tales, Pep Stories*, etc.) and the sports magazines (*Fight Stories, Thrilling Sports, Football Stories*, etc.) that are not heavily collected today and usually receive less mention in discussions of the pulps. As the pulp era rolled on, the publishers competed with gaudier covers and more specialized concepts and titles; Robinson and Davidson give us the pulps in all of their outlandish — sometimes downright silly — diversity. Among the familiar *Amazing, The Shadow*, and *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, we find *Speakeasy Stories, Fifth Column Stories, The Railroad Man's Magazine, Gun Molls, The Danger Trail*, and (my personal favorite) *Zeppelin Stories*, which ran for only four issues and featured, on the third, a most outrageous illustration for its lead story, "The Gorilla of the Gas Bags." The

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authors fill us in on some of the sillier items found behind the covers as well, including Ejler Jacobson's hemophiliac detective, known as "the world's most vulnerable dick." They're not afraid to admit to the absurdity with which the pulps often flirted — Robinson and Davidson even get a little snide in their captions ("how many stories would you want to read about speakeasies?" they ask).

Pulp Culture has its faults, though they're relatively minor. The sheer number of illustrations almost hypnotizes after a while — that's why it's better to browse than read straight through — and they're not arranged chronologically, even within each chapter, so it's hard to get a clear sense for the developments and changes that Robinson and Davidson describe in their text. To compare, you need to pay very close attention to the dates given in the captions. And the text, while more detailed on topics such as the origins of the pulps, doesn't always strike me as reliable. I'm no pulp scholar, so I hesitate to criticize, but for instance Robinson and Davidson take veteran pulp writer L. Ron Hubbard's claims of world travel and adventure as writ, while recent historians of the genre have determined that Hubbard's autobiography was by and large as fictional as his stories. Such a lapse has to make the reader cautious about the information in the rest of the book.

Like Lesser, though, Robinson and Davidson seem wholly reliable when they're sticking to the material they know best — the magazines themselves. And while they may get some of the ancillary details wrong, they and their book offer the fullest evocation I've ever encountered of the thrills of the pulps. "The pulps had their faults," they admit, "bad writing was as prevalent as good and they mirrored their times in their insensitivity to race and frequently adolescent attitude toward women — but when they were good, they were very good." As a devoted fan of Lovecraft, Howard, and dozens of other pulp writers, I couldn't agree more.

Vincent di Fate's compendium of sf art, *Infinite Worlds*, expands our scope of inquiry even further. He covers the pulp era, certainly, but he extends an eye to sf art both before and after that time, and we see what became of the pulp style as the decades passed. Things were lost and things were gained, but the eye disposed to be moved by the work of Hannes Bok, Frank R.

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Paul, Hubert Rogers, and J. Allen St. John can hardly be disappointed by the haunting grandeur of Paul Lehr's futurescapes or the meticulous renderings of Michael Whelan.

Di Fate begins with a look, not unlike Lesser's, at the origins of sf art. Because he focuses on sf rather than the pulp mode in general, he identifies somewhat different roots — the sketches of Leonardo da Vinci and the visions of Hieronymus Bosch, for instance, in which he identifies two opposite but complementary artistic responses to technological change. Da Vinci's futuristic weaponry, vehicles, and devices generally convey a positive feeling about the effects of new technologies, while Bosch's nightmarish images reveal his deep uneasiness with the changes that technology and invention had caused in society. Di Fate suggests, quite rightly, that sf art has continued this conversation up to the present day.

The latter two-thirds of *Infinite Worlds* consist of an alphabetical gallery of sf artists — not every one, but a generous and representative selection, with biographical and critical notes by di Fate. [The section dedicated to di Fate's own artwork has notes by fellow artist Murray Tinkelman.] Here again it's easier and more rewarding to browse than to attempt a linear reading. A couple of hours flipping through the gallery pages, from the surreal imagery of Don Ivan Punchatz to the atmospheric work of Stanley Meltzoff, from the familiar (Frank Frazetta) to the obscure (R. G. Jones), from the innocent imaginings of Frank R. Paul and H. W. Wesso to the gritty and disturbing imagery of Marshall Arisman and Rick Berry, and you'll have an armchair tour of an sf art museum that doesn't exist outside of books. If for no other reason than that di Fate's book surveys the field up to the very present, *Infinite Worlds* offers an experience unlike that of any other book on the shelves today.

What emerges most forcefully from di Fate's survey is a sense that, while sf art has gained in technical mastery and elegance in the years since the pulps filled the stands, it has inevitably lost something of the spirit of those early years. Pulp art, as revealed in *Pulp Art* and *Pulp Culture*, possesses an infectious sense of freedom and energy, and while it frequently appeals to "baser" instincts with images of violence and titillation, it also has a kind of innocence that makes that vulgarity not merely acceptable but, paradoxically, virtuous, in that its appeal is so direct and honest that

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the viewer can hardly feel sullied. Pulp art lets us revel in the uncomplicated emotions that first brought us to reading, sf or otherwise.

In that sense, pulp sf art is not unlike pulp sf fiction, and the changes that have occurred in the one are not unlike those that have taken place in the other. On the whole, sf writing today sports a greater command of literary technique and encompasses a much broader range of possible approaches than it did in the days of the pulps, and, as *Infinite Worlds* makes clear, the same holds true for sf art. As di Fate puts it: "At no time in history have there been more artists in the sf specialty who can draw and paint with so high a degree of excellence. What many of these artists lack, however, is an extrapolative keenness...that carries sf to a higher level." Something similar, I think, might be said of the literature itself.

Which is not to suggest that today's sf — art or literature — is somehow worse than what the pulps had to offer. It is to admit that with greater technical and conceptual sophistication comes a loss of simpler things — and that those simpler things have their merits, too. As Lesser argues in *Pulp Art*, it's not that pulp art should be considered in the same ways as fine art, but we can acknowledge and enjoy the pleasures that it brings as well, without abandoning our appreciation for Rembrandt or Caravaggio. It need not be a question of either-or: we can, and we do, have both.

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Of late, Bob Sheckley has been writing mostly mystery novels, including Soma Blues *and* Draconian New York. *He's currently finishing up a new fantasy entitled* Godshome. *Of course, Bob has also been entertaining us with skewed short stories for four decades now, and it's nice to see he's not letting up. Witness this story of a visit to a blue and white world.*

Emissary from a Green and Yellow World

By Robert Sheckley

ONE THING ABOUT PRESIDENT Rice. He was able to make up his mind. When Ong came to Earth with his contention, Rice believed him. Not that it made any difference in the end.

It began when the Marine guard came into the Oval Office, his face ashen.

"What is it?" said President Rice, looking up from his papers.

"Someone wants to see you," the guard said.

"So? A lot of people want to see the President of the United States. Is his name on the morning list?"

"You don't understand, sir. This guy — he just — materialized! One moment he wasn't there and the next moment, there he was, standing in front of me in the corridor. And he isn't a man, sir. He stands on two legs but he isn't a man. He's — he's — I don't know what he is!"

And the guard burst into tears.

Rice had seen other men cave in from the pressures of government. But what did a Marine guard have to do with pressures?

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"Listen, son," Rice said.

The guard hastily rubbed tears out of his eyes. "Yes, sir." His voice was shaky, but it wasn't hysterical.

"What I want you to do," Rice said, "is take the rest of the day off. Go home. Get some rest. Come back here tomorrow refreshed. If your supervisor asks about it, tell him I ordered it. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"And on your way, send in that fellow you met in the corridor. The one you say doesn't look human. Don't talk to him. Just tell him I'm waiting to see him."

The fellow was not long in coming. He was about six feet tall. He wore a silver one-piece jump suit that shimmered when you looked at it. His features were difficult to describe. All you could say for sure was, he didn't look human.

"I know what you're thinking," the fellow said. "You are thinking that I don't look human."

"That's right," Rice said.

"You're correct. I'm not human. Intelligent, yes. Human, no. You can call me Ong. I'm from Omair, a planet in the constellation you call Sagittarius. Omair is a yellow and green world. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you," Rice said.

"May I ask why?"

"It's just a hunch," Rice said. "I think that if you stayed around here and submitted to an examination by a team of our scientists, they'd conclude that you were an alien. So let's get right to it. You're an alien. I accept that you're from a green and yellow world named Omair. Now what?"

"You're asking, I suppose, why I've come here, at this time?"

"That's right."

"Well, sir, I've come to warn you that your sun is going to go nova in about one hundred and fifty of your years."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Why'd you wait so long to get around to telling us?"

"We just found out ourselves. As soon as it was confirmed, my people

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sent me as emissary to give your planet the information and offer what assistance we could."

"Why did they pick you?"

"I was chosen at random for off-planet service. It could have been any of us."

"If you say so."

"Now I have delivered the message. How can we help?"

Rice was feeling very peculiar. He didn't understand it, but he really did believe the emissary. But he also knew his belief was futile in terms of saving Earth's people. Ong's contention would have to be submitted to scientific proof. Before any conclusions could be reached, the Earth would vaporize in the expanding sun. Rice knew that if he wanted to do anything about it, it would have to begin now.

Rice said, "Some of our scientists have made similar conjectures as to our eventual doom."

"They're right. Within approximately one hundred and fifty years this planet will no longer be habitable. May I be blunt? You're going to have to get off. All of you. And you must begin immediately."

"Great," President Rice said. "Oh, that's just great."

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm just having a little trouble assimilating this." Rice put a hand to his forehead. "This is a nightmare situation. But I have to deal with it as if it's real. Because it probably is." He wiped his forehead again. "Let's say I believe you. How could we do anything about it?"

"We of Omair are ready to help. We will give you detailed plans explaining what you must do to make starships for all Earth's people. There will be further instructions for getting all the people together and into the ships in an orderly manner. Please understand, we're just trying to help, not impose ourselves on you."

"I believe you," Rice said, and he did.

"There's a lot to be done," the emissary said. "It's a big task, but you humans are just as smart as we Omairians — we checked on that, no use wasting our time on dummies. With your present level of technology, and with our assistance, you can do this and be away within the next hundred years."

"It's a tremendously exciting prospect," Rice said.

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"We thought you'd feel that way. You aren't the only planetary civilization we've been able to rescue."

"That is very much to your credit."

"Nothing to praise. This is how we Omairians are."

"I'm going to have to ask something that may sound a little strange," Rice said. "But this is Earth so I have to ask it. Who's going to pay for all this?"

"If it's necessary," Ong said, "we of Omair are willing to defray the costs."

"Thank you. That's very good of you."

"We know."

"So what will be necessary?"

"To begin with, you'll need to clear out the center of one of your continents for the launching pads. But that's not too difficult, because you can distribute the people in the other continents. That will disrupt commerce and farming, of course. But we will supply whatever food is needed."

Rice could imagine it now — the slow convening of experts from all over the globe, the quarreling, the demands for more and more proofs. And even if a consensus of scientists came to agreement after many years, what about the population at large? Before any sizeable portion of the Earth's people could be convinced, the Earth would long since have vaporized in the expanding sun.

"Simultaneous to the building of the starships," the emissary went on, "you'll have to get your populations indoctrinated, innoculated — we'll supply the medicines — and in general prepared for a long journey by starship. During the transition period you'll require temporary housing for millions. We can help there."

"Is the indoctrination really necessary? Earth people hate that sort of thing."

"Absolutely essential. Your people will not be prepared for a lifetime of shipboard life. Hypnotherapy may be needed in many cases. We can supply the machines. I know your people won't like it, being uprooted this way. But it's either that or perish in about a hundred years."

"I'm convinced," Rice said. "The question is, can I sell it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

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"Well, it's not just a case of convincing me, you know. There are tens of millions of people out there who won't believe you."

"But surely if you order them to take the necessary measures for their own good..."

"I'm just the ruler of one country, not the whole planet. And I can't even order my own countrymen to do what you're suggesting."

"You don't have to order it. Just suggest it and show the proofs. Humans are intelligent. They'll acccept your view."

Rice shook his head. "Believe me, they won't believe me. Most of them will think this is a diabolical plot on the part of government, or some church, or the Islamic Conspiracy, or some other. Some will think little gray aliens are trying to trick us into captivity. Others will believe it's the work of a long-vanished Elder Race, here to do us in. Whatever the reason, everyone will be sure it's a plot of some kind."

"A plot to do what?" Ong asked.

"To enslave us."

"We of Omair don't do that sort of thing. We have a perfect record in that regard. I can offer proofs."

"You keep on talking about proofs," Rice said. "But most humans are proof-proof."

"Is that really true?."

"Sad to say, it's true."

"It goes against accepted theory. We have always believed that intelligence invariably produces rationality."

"Not in these parts. Not with us."

"I'm sorry to hear that. We Omairians thought this was just a matter of one colleague calling on another and warning him of a danger, then advising him on what steps to take. I had no idea humans might resist believing. It's not rational, you know. Are you quite sure of this?"

"That's how humans are. And above all, they're conditioned from earliest age against taking orders from aliens."

"I wouldn't be giving any orders."

"You'd be advising the government. In people's minds, that would be the equivalent of giving orders."

"I don't know what to tell you," the emissary said. "Is there really no way you could convince people otherwise?"

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"I can tell you here and now, it'll never work."

Ong gave a slight inclination of his head. "Well, it has been nice meeting you. Have a nice day."

The emissary turned to go.

"Just one moment," Rice said.

The alien paused, turned. "Yes?"

"What about just taking those of us who do believe, who want to go?"

"It's unprecedented," the emissary said. "In all our experience, races either can change their thinking and get away from their doomed worlds by their own efforts, or they cannot."

"We're different," Rice said.

"All right," the emissary said. "I'll do it. Gather your people. I'll be back in ten years to take those who want to go. We can't wait any longer than that."

"We'll be ready."

TEN YEARS LATER, the emissary came to a small, hand-built house in a corner of the Oregon Cascade Mountains. A trout stream ran behind the house, and Rice was standing beside the stream, fishing.

Rice said, "How did you find me here?"

"Once we Omairians have met you, we can always find you again. But I think you are not president any longer."

"No," Rice said. "My term ended and I didn't get reelected. I tried to convince people of the destruction that lay ahead. Nearly everyone thought I was a crackpot. Those who did believe me were worse than those who didn't. A crazy man tried to shoot me and killed my wife instead. My children hold me responsible. They changed their names and moved away."

"I am sorry to hear that," the emissary said. "But I think you'll have to admit that those other people, the ones who despise and disbelieve you, do not have your grasp, your intelligence, your intuition. You're probably the most unusual man of your century, Mr. Rice. You believed in us from the start. You didn't think we were sent by God or the devil. You accepted what we said. Evidently you were the only one."

"Evidently."

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"Perhaps it's for the best," the emissary said. "Your people, in their present state, could never have made it out there. But you could."

"Me?"

"Your true place is with us, Mr. Rice, out in the galaxy. There is still time. You are not an old man. We have rejuvenation treatments. We can add many years to your life. We have women of our species who would be honored to mate with you. We have a civilization that would welcome you. I beg of you, leave this doomed Earth behind and come away with me."

"No, I think not," Rice said. "I can still look forward to living another thirty or so years on Earth before things get too bad, can't I?"

"Yes, but no longer."

"It's enough. I'll stay."

"You choose to die here with your people? But they will perish because of their own ignorance."

"Yes. But they are Earth's children, as I am. My place is here with them."

"I find it difficult to believe you're saying this."

"I did a lot of thinking about it. It occurred to me that I was really no different from the other humans. Not fundamentally. And certainly no better."

"I can't accept that. Anyhow, what is your inference?"

"It seemed to me that if my species was incapable of believing in its own doom, it was not for me to believe in it, either. So I've decided that all that stuff you talked about is not going to happen. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've dreamed all this up."

"It is not intelligence," said the emissary, "to take refuge in solipsism."

"My mind's made up. I'll stay here with my trout stream. You've never done any fly fishing, have you, emissary?"

"Where I come from," the emissary said, "we don't fish. We respect all life."

"Does that mean you don't eat flesh of any kind?"

"That is correct."

"What about vegetables? They're living things."

"We don't eat vegetables, either. We convert our energy from inert

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chemicals, or, if necessary, we transform it directly from solar radiation. We can re-engineer you so you can do that, too."

"I'll just bet you can," Rice said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. Or rather, you heard my implication. The sort of life you offer wouldn't be human. It would be hellish. It wouldn't be worth living for a fellow like me, to say nothing of my friends. I refer to the rest of the human race."

"You mentioned hell. There is no hell."

"Yes there is. Hell is me talking to you. Now do me a favor and get out of my face."

The emissary left, and, outside, paused for a moment, looking back at the house. Would Rice change his mind? No indication of it. Ong shrugged and returned to his vehicle. With a gesture he brought it up to full visibility and got aboard.

Soon he was high in the air, with the green and blue planet receding below him. Soon he would put in the faster than light drive.

But just before he did, he turned back and took a last look. A good-looking planet, and intelligent people. A pity to see it all lost.

He brooded for a moment, but only a moment. Then he consoled himself with the knowledge that this represented no real loss to the Cosmos. After all, intelligent life had evolved again and again on planets all over the universe.

But what had evolved was intelligent life much like that of Ong and his people. That was the standard, the norm. But intelligent life like Earth's? Intelligent irrational life? It had to be a fluke, a one-of-a-kind thing, this mating of intelligence and irrationality. The emissary didn't think the universe had seen Earth's like before. It probably would not again.

He looked down once more at the Earth. It looked like a nice place. But of course, there were more where that came from. Sort of. In any event, it was time to get back to his own green and yellow world.

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"Do you have a longer straw?"

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John Kessel's most recent novel is Corrupting Dr. Nice, *and his most recent story collection is* The Pure Product. *Other current projects of his include an audio play produced by the Seeing Ear Theater (http://www.scifi.com/set/originals), and in serving as literary executor for the late Lawrence S. Rudner he edited the latter's last novel,* Memory's Tailor.

A good man, Flannery O'Connor taught us, is hard to find. But where does one begin to look? Within...or beyond?

Every Angel Is Terrifying

By John Kessel

RAILROAD WATCHED BOBBY Lee grab the grandmother's body under the armpits and drag her up the other side of the ditch. "Whyn't you help him, Hiram," he said.

Hiram took off his coat, skidded down into the ditch after Bobby Lee, and got hold of the old lady's legs. Together he and Bobby Lee lugged her across the field toward the woods. Her broken blue hat was still pinned to her head, which lolled against Bobby Lee's shoulder. The woman's face grinned lopsidedly all the way into the shadow of the trees.

Railroad carried the cat over to the Studebaker. It occurred to him that he didn't know the cat's name, and now that the entire family was dead he never would. It was a calico, gray striped with a broad white face and an orange nose. "What's your name, puss-puss?" he whispered, scratching it behind the ears. The cat purred. One by one Railroad went round and rolled up the windows of the car. A fracture zigzagged across the windshield, and the front passenger's vent window was shattered. He stuffed Hiram's coat into the vent window hole. Then he put the cat inside the car

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and shut the door. The cat put its front paws up on the dashboard and, watching him, gave a pantomime meow.

Railroad pushed up his glasses and stared off toward the woodline where Bobby Lee and Hiram had taken the bodies. The place was hot and still, silence broken only by birdsong from somewhere up the embankment behind him. He squinted up into the cloudless sky. Only a couple of hours of sun left. He rubbed the spot on his shoulder where the grandmother had touched him. Somehow he had wrenched it when he jerked away from her.

The last thing the grandmother had said picked at him: "You're one of my own children." The old lady had looked familiar, but she didn't look anything like his mother. But maybe his father had sown some wild oats in the old days — Railroad knew he had — could the old lady have been his mother, for real? It would explain why the woman who had raised him, the sweetest of women, could have been saddled with a son as bad as he was.

The idea caught in his head. He wished he'd had the sense to ask the grandmother a few questions. The old woman might have been sent to tell him the truth.

When Hiram and Bobby Lee came back, they found Railroad leaning under the hood of the car.

"What we do now, boss?" Bobby Lee asked.

"Police could be here any minute," Hiram said. Blood was smeared on the leg of his khaki pants. "Somebody might of heard the shots."

Railroad pulled himself out from under the hood. "Onliest thing we got to worry about now, Hiram, is how we get this radiator to stop leaking. You find a tire iron and straighten out this here fan. Bobby Lee, you get the belt off'n the other car."

It took longer than the half hour Hiram had estimated to get the people's Studebaker back on the road. By the time they did it was twilight, and the red-dirt road was cast in the shadows of the pinewoods. They pushed the stolen Hudson they'd been driving off into the trees and got into the Studebaker.

Railroad gripped the wheel of the car and they bounced down the dirt road toward the main highway. Hat pushed back on his head, Hiram went through the dead man's wallet, while in the back seat Bobby Lee had the

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cat on his lap and was scratching it under the chin. "Kitty-kitty-kitty-kitty-kitty," he murmured.

"Sixty-eight dollars," Hiram said. "With the twenty-two from the wife's purse, that makes ninety bucks." He turned around and handed a wad of bills to Bobby Lee. "Get rid of that damn cat," he said. "Want me to hold yours for you?" he asked Railroad.

Railroad reached over, took the bills, and stuffed them into the pocket of the yellow shirt with bright blue parrots that had belonged to the husband who'd been driving the car. Bailey Boy, the grandmother had called him. Railroad's shoulder twinged.

The car shuddered; the wheels had been knocked out of kilter when it rolled. If he tried pushing past fifty, it would shake itself right off the road. Railroad felt the warm weight of his pistol inside his belt, against his belly. Bobby Lee hummed tunelessly in the back seat. Hiram was quiet, fidgeting, looking out at the dark trees. He tugged his battered coat out of the vent window, tried to shake some of the wrinkles out of it. "You oughtn't to use a man's coat without saying to him," he grumbled.

Bobby Lee spoke up. "He didn't want the cat to get away."

Hiram sneezed. "Will you throw that damn animal out the damn window?"

"She never hurt you none," Bobby Lee said.

Railroad said nothing. He had always imagined that the world was slightly unreal, that he was meant to be the citizen of some other place. His mind was a box. Outside the box was that world of distraction, amusement, annoyance. Inside the box his real life went on, the struggle between what he knew and what he didn't know. He had a way of acting — polite, detached — because that way he wouldn't be bothered. When he was bothered, he got mad. When he got mad, bad things happened.

He had always been prey to remorse, but now he felt it more fully than he had since he was a boy. He hadn't paid enough attention. He'd pegged the old lady as a hypocrite and had gone back into his box, thinking her just another fool from that puppet world. But that moment of her touching him — she'd wanted to comfort him. And he shot her.

What was it the old woman had said? "You could be honest if you'd only try.... Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a

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comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

He knew she was only saying that to save her life. But that didn't mean it couldn't also be a message.

Outside the box, Hiram asked, "What was all that yammer yammer with the grandmother about Jesus? We doing all the killing while you yammer yammer."

"He did shoot the old lady," Bobby Lee said.

"And made us carry her off to the woods, when if he'd of waited she could of walked there like the others. We're the ones get blood on our clothes."

Railroad said quietly, "You don't like the way things are going, son?"

Hiram twitched against the seat like he was itchy between the shoulder blades. "I ain't sayin' that. I just want out of this state."

"We going to Atlanta. In Atlanta we can get lost."

"Gonna get me a girl!" Bobby Lee said.

"They got more cops in Atlanta than the rest of the state put together," Hiram said. "In Florida...."

Without taking his eyes off the road, Railroad snapped his right hand across the bridge of Hiram's nose. Hiram jerked, more startled than hurt, and his hat tumbled off into the back seat.

Bobby Lee laughed, and handed Hiram his hat.

IT WAS after 11:00 when they hit the outskirts of Atlanta. Railroad pulled into a diner, the Sweet Spot, red brick and an asbestos-shingled roof, the air smelling of cigarettes and pork barbecue. Hiram rubbed some dirt from the lot into the stain on his pants leg. Railroad unlocked the trunk and found the dead man's suitcase, full of clothes. He carried it in with them.

On the radio sitting on the shelf behind the counter, Kitty Wells sang "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels." Railroad studied the menu, front and back, and ordered biscuits and gravy. While they ate Bobby Lee ran on about girls, and Hiram sat sullenly smoking. Railroad could tell Hiram was getting ready to do something stupid. He didn't need either of them anymore. So after they finished eating, Railroad left the car

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keys on the table and took the suitcase into the men's room. He locked the door. He pulled his .38 out of his waistband, put it on the sink, and changed out of the too-tight dungarees into some of the dead husband's baggy trousers. He washed his face and hands. He cleaned his glasses on the tail of the parrot shirt, then tucked in the shirt. He stuck the .38 into the suitcase and came out again. Bobby Lee and Hiram were gone, and the car was no longer in the parking lot. The bill on the table, next to Hiram's still smoldering cigarette, was for six dollars and eighty cents.

Railroad sat in the booth drinking his coffee. In the window of the diner, near the door, a piece of cardboard had been taped up, saying, "WANTED: FRY COOK." When he was done with the coffee, he untaped the sign and headed to the register. After he paid the bill he handed the cashier the sign. "I'm your man," he said.

The cashier called the manager. "Mr. Cauthron, this man says he's a cook."

Mr. Cauthron was maybe thirty-five years old. His carrot red hair stood up in a pompadour like a rooster's comb, and a little belly swelled out over his belt. "What's your name?"

"Lloyd Bailey."

"Lloyd, what experience do you have?"

"I can cook anything on this here menu," Railroad said.

The manager took him back to the kitchen. "Stand aside, Shorty," the manager said to the tall black man at the griddle. "Fix me a Denver omelet," he said to Railroad.

Railroad washed his hands, put on an apron, broke two eggs into a bowl. He threw handfuls of chopped onion, green pepper, and diced ham into a skillet. When the onions were soft, he poured the beaten eggs over the ham and vegetables, added salt and cayenne pepper. When he slid the finished omelet onto a plate, the manager bent down over it as if he were inspecting the paint job on a used car. He straightened up. "Pay's thirty dollars a week. Be here at six in the morning."

Out in the lot Railroad set down his bag and looked around. Cicadas buzzed in the hot city night. Around the corner from the diner he'd noticed a big Victorian house with a sign on the porch, "Rooms for Rent." He was about to start walking when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement by the trash barrel next to the chain link fence. He peered into

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the gloom and saw the cat trying to leap up to the top to get at the garbage. He went over, held out his hand. The cat didn't run; it sniffed him, butted its head against his hand.

He picked it up, cradled it under his arm, and carried it and the bag to the rooming house. Under dense oaks, it was a big tan clapboard mansion with green shutters and hanging baskets of begonias on the porch, and a green porch swing. The thick oval leaded glass of the oak door was beveled around the edge, the brass of the handle dark with age.

The door was unlocked. His heart jumped a bit at the opportunity it presented; at the same time he wanted to warn the proprietor against such foolishness. Off to one side of the entrance was a little table with a doily, vase and dried flowers; on the other a sign beside a door said, "manager."

Railroad knocked. After a moment the door opened and a woman with the face of an angel opened it. She was not young, perhaps forty, with very white skin and blonde hair. She looked at him, smiled, saw the cat under his arm. "What a sweet animal," she said.

"I'd like a room," he said.

"I'm sorry. We don't cater to pets," the woman said, not unkindly.

"This here's no pet, Ma'm," Railroad said. "This here's my only friend in the world."

The landlady's name was Mrs. Graves. The room she rented him was twelve feet by twelve feet, with a single bed, a cherry veneer dresser, a wooden table and chair, a narrow closet, lace curtains on the window, and an old pineapple quilt on the bed. The air smelled sweet. On the wall opposite the bed was a picture in a dime store frame, of an empty rowboat floating in an angry gray ocean, the sky overcast, only a single shaft of sunlight in the distance from a sunset that was not in the picture.

The room cost ten dollars a week. Despite Mrs. Graves's rule against pets, like magic she took a shine to Railroad's cat. It was almost as if she'd rented the room to the cat, with Railroad along for the ride. After some consideration, he named the cat Pleasure. She was the most affectionate animal he had ever seen. She wanted to be with him, even when he ignored her. She made him feel wanted; she made him nervous. Railroad fashioned a cat door in the window of his room so that Pleasure could go out and in

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whenever she wanted, and not be confined to the room when Railroad was at work.

The only other residents of the boarding house were Louise Parker, a school teacher, and Charles Foster, a lingerie salesman. Mrs. Graves cleaned Railroad's room once a week, swept the floors, alternated the quilt every other week with a second one done in a rose pattern that he remembered from his childhood. He worked at the diner from six in the morning, when Maisie, the cashier, unlocked, until Shorty took over at three in the afternoon. The counter girl was Betsy, and Service, a Negro boy, bussed tables and washed dishes. Railroad told them to call him Bailey, and didn't talk much.

When he wasn't working, Railroad spent most of his time at the boarding house, or evenings in a small nearby park. Railroad would take the Bible from the drawer in the boarding house table, buy an afternoon newspaper, and carry them with him. Pleasure often followed him to the park. She would lunge after squirrels and shy away from dogs, hissing sideways. Cats liked to kill squirrels,and dogs liked to kill cats. But there was no sin in it. Pleasure would not go to hell, or heaven. Cats had no souls.

The world was full of stupid people like Bobby Lee and Hiram, who lied to themselves and killed without knowing why. Life was a prison. Turn to the right, it was a wall. Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. And Railroad had taken out his imprisonment on others; he was not deceived in his own behavior.

Railroad did not believe in sin, but somehow he felt it. Still, he was not a dog or a cat, he was a man. *You're one of my own children.* There was no reason why he had to kill people. He only wished he'd never have to deal with any Hirams and Bobby Lees anymore. He gazed across the park at the Ipana toothpaste sign painted on the wall of the Piggly Wiggly. *Whiter than white.* Pleasure crouched at the end of the bench, her haunches twitching as she watched a finch hop across the sidewalk.

Railroad picked her up, rubbed his cheek against her whiskers. "Pleasure, I'll tell you what," he whispered. "Let's make us a deal. You save me from Bobby Lee and Hiram, and I'll never kill anybody again."

The cat looked at him with its clear yellow eyes.

Railroad sighed. He put the cat down. He leaned back on the bench and opened the newspaper. Beneath the fold on the front page he read,

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Escaped Convicts Killed in Wreck

VALDOSTA — Two escaped convicts and an unidentified female passenger were killed Tuesday when the late model stolen automobile they were driving struck a bridge abutment while being pursued by State Police.

The deceased convicts, Hiram Leroy Burgett, 31, and Bobby Lee Ross, 21, escaped June 23 while being transported to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane for psychological evaluation. A third escapee, Ronald Reuel Pickens, 47, is still at large.

THE LUNCH RUSH was petering out. There were two people at the counter and four booths were occupied, and Railroad had set a BLT and an order of fried chicken with collards up on the shelf when Maisie came back into the kitchen and called the manager. "Police wants to talk to you, Mr. C."

Railroad peeked out from behind the row of hanging order slips. A man in a suit sat at the counter, sipping sweet tea. Cauthron went out to talk to him.

"Two castaways on a raft," Betsy called to Railroad.

The man spoke with Cauthron for a few minutes, showed him a photograph. Cauthron shook his head, nodded, shook his head again. They laughed. Railroad eyed the back door of the diner, but turned back to the grill. By the time he had the toast up and the eggs fried, the man was gone. Cauthron stepped back to his office without saying anything.

At the end of the shift he pulled Railroad aside. "Lloyd," he said. "I need to speak with you."

Railroad followed him into the cubbyhole he called his office. Cauthron sat behind the cluttered metal desk and picked up a letter from the top layer of trash. "I just got this here note from Social Security saying that number you gave is not valid." He looked up at Railroad, his china blue eyes unreadable.

Railroad took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He didn't say anything.

"I suppose it's just some mixup," Cauthron said. "Same as that business with the detective this afternoon. Don't you worry about it."

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"Thank you, Mr. Cauthron."

"One other thing, before you go, Lloyd. Did I say your salary was thirty a week? I meant twenty-five. That okay with you?"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cauthron."

"And I think, in order to encourage trade, we'll start opening at five. I'd like you to pick up the extra hour. Starting Monday."

Railroad nodded. "Is that all?"

"That's it, Lloyd." Cauthron seemed suddenly to enjoy calling Railroad "Lloyd," rolling the name over his tongue and watching for his reaction. "Thanks for being such a Christian employee."

Railroad went back to his room in the rooming house. Pleasure mewed for him, and when he sat on the bed, hopped into his lap. But Railroad just stared at the picture of the rowboat on the opposite wall. After a while the cat hopped onto the window sill and out through her door onto the roof.

Only a crazy person would use the knowledge that a man was a murderer in order to cheat that man out of his pay. How could he know that Railroad wouldn't kill him, or run away, or do both?

Lucky for Cauthron that Railroad had made his deal with Pleasure. But now he didn't know what to do. If the old lady's message was from God, then maybe this was his first test. Nobody said being good was supposed to be easy. Nobody said, just because Railroad was turning to good, everybody he met forever after would be good. Railroad had asked Pleasure to save him from Bobby Lee and Hiram, not Mr. Cauthron.

He needed guidance. He slid open the drawer of the table. Beside the Bible was his .38. He flipped open the cylinder, checked to see that all the chambers were loaded, then put it back into the drawer. He took out the Bible and opened it at random.

The first verse his eyes fell on was from Deuteronomy: "These you may eat of all that are in the waters: you may eat all that have fins and scales. And whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat."

There was a knock at the door. Railroad looked up. "Yes?"

"Mr. Bailey?" It was Mrs. Graves. "I thought you might like some tea."

Keeping his finger in the Bible to mark his page, Railroad got up and opened the door. Mrs. Graves stood there with a couple of tall glasses, beaded with sweat, on a tray.

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"That's mighty kind of you, Miz Graves. Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you, Mr. Bailey." She set the tray down on the table, gave him a glass. It was like nectar. "Is it sweet enough?"

"It's perfect, ma'm."

She wore a yellow print dress with little flowers on it. Her every movement showed a calm he had not seen in a woman before, and her gray eyes exuded compassion, as if to say, I know who you are but that doesn't matter.

They sat down, he on the bed, she on the chair. She saw the Bible in his hand. "I find many words of comfort in the Bible."

"I can't say as I find much comfort in it, ma'm. Too many bloody deeds."

"But many acts of goodness."

"You said a true word."

"Sometimes I wish I could live in the world of goodness." She smiled. "But this world is good enough."

Did she really think that? "Since Eve ate the apple, ma'm, it's a world of good and evil. How can goodness make up for the bad? That's a mystery to me."

She sipped her tea. "Of course it's a mystery. That's the point."

"The point is, something's always after you, deserve it or not."

"What a sad thought, Mr. Bailey."

"Yes'm. From minute to minute, we fade away. Only way to get to heaven is to die."

AFTER MRS. GRAVES left he sat thinking about her beautiful face. Like an angel. Nice titties, too.

He would marry her. He would settle down, like the grandmother said. But he would have to get an engagement ring. If he'd been thinking, he could have taken the grandmother's ring — but how was he supposed to know when he'd killed her that he was going to fall in love so soon?

He opened the dresser, felt among the dead man's clothes until he found the sock, pulled out his savings. It was only forty-three dollars.

The only help for it was to ask Pleasure. Railroad paced the room. It

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was a long time, and Railroad began to worry, before the cat came back. The cat slipped silently through her door, lay down on the table, simple as you please, in the wedge of sunlight coming in the window. Railroad got down on his knees, his face level with the table top. The cat went "Mrrph?" and raised its head. Railroad gazed into her steady eyes.

"Pleasure," he said. "I need to get an engagement ring, and I don't have enough money. Get one for me."

The cat watched him.

He waited for some sign. Nothing happened.

Then, like a dam bursting, a flood of confidence flowed into him. He knew what he would do.

The next morning he walked down to the Sweet Spot whistling. He spent much of his shift imagining when and how he would ask Mrs. Graves for her hand. Maybe on the porch swing, on Saturday night? Or at breakfast some morning? He could leave the ring next to his plate and she would find it, with his note, when clearing the table. Or he could come down to her room in the middle of the night, and he'd ram himself into her in the darkness, make her whimper, then lay the perfect diamond on her breast.

At the end of the shift he took a beefsteak from the diner's refrigerator as an offering to Pleasure. But when he entered his room the cat was not there. He left the meat wrapped in butcher paper in the kitchen downstairs, then went back up and changed into Bailey Boy's baggy suit. At the corner he took the bus downtown and walked into the first jewelry store he saw. He made the woman show him several diamond engagement rings. Then the phone rang, and when the woman went to answer it he pocketed a ring and walked out. No clerk in her right mind should be so careless, but it went exactly as he had imagined it. As easy as breathing.

That night he had a dream. He was alone with Mrs. Graves, and she was making love to him. But as he moved against her, he felt the skin of her full breast deflate and wrinkle beneath his hand, and he found he was making love to the dead grandmother, her face grinning the same vacant grin it had when Hiram and Bobby Lee hauled her into the woods.

Railroad woke in terror. Pleasure was sitting on his chest, her face an inch from his, purring loud as a diesel. He snatched the cat up in both

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hands and hurled her across the room. She hit the wall with a thump, then fell to the floor, claws skittering on the hardwood. She scuttled for the window, through the door onto the porch roof.

It took him ten minutes for his heart to slow down, and then he could not sleep.

Someone is always after you. That day in the diner, when Railroad was taking a break, sitting on a stool in front of the window fan sipping some ice water, Cauthron came out of the office and put his hand on his shoulder, the one that still hurt occasionally. "Hot work, ain't it boy?"

"Yessir." Railroad was ten or twelve years older than Cauthron.

"What is this world coming to?" Maisie said to nobody in particular. She had the newspaper open on the counter and was scanning the headlines. "You read what it says here about some man robbing a diamond ring right out from under the nose of the clerk at Merriam's Jewelry."

"I saw that already," Mr. Cauthron said. And after a moment, "White fellow, wasn't it?"

"It was," sighed Maisie. "Must be some trash from the backwoods. Some of those poor people have not had the benefit of a Christian upbringing."

"They'll catch him. Men like that always get caught." Cauthron leaned in the doorway of his office, arms crossed above his belly. "Maisie," Cauthron said. "Did I tell you Lloyd here is the best short order cook we've had in here since 1947? The best *white* short order cook."

"I heard you say that."

"I mean, makes you wonder where he was before he came here. Was he short order cooking all round Atlanta? Seems like we would of heard, don't it? Come to think, Lloyd never told me much about where he was before he showed up that day. He ever say much to you, Maisie?"

"Can't say as I recall."

"You can't recall because he hasn't. What you say, Lloyd? Why is that?"

"No time for conversation, Mr. Cauthron."

"No time for conversation? You carrying some resentment, Lloyd? We ain't paying you enough?"

"I didn't say that."

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"Because, if you don't like it here, I'd be unhappy to lose the best white short order cook I had since 1947."

Railroad put down his empty glass and slipped on his paper hat. "I can't afford to lose this job. And, you don't mind my saying, Mr. Cauthron, you'd come to regret it if I was forced to leave."

"Weren't you listening, Lloyd? Isn't that what I just said?"

"Yes, you did. Now maybe we ought to quit bothering Maisie with our talk and get back to work."

"I like a man that enjoys his job," Cauthron said, slapping Railroad on the shoulder again. "I'd have to be suicidal to make a good worker like you leave. Do I look suicidal, Lloyd?"

"No, you don't look suicidal, Mr. Cauthron."

"I see Pleasure all the time going down the block to pick at the trash by the Sweet Spot," Mrs. Graves told him as they sat on the front porch swing that evening. "That cat could get hurt if you let it out so much. That is a busy street."

Foster had gone to a ball game, and Louise Parker was visiting her sister in Chattanooga, so they were alone. It was the opportunity Railroad had been waiting for.

"I don't want to keep her a prisoner," he said. The chain of the swing creaked as they rocked slowly back and forth. He could smell her lilac perfume. The curve of her thigh beneath her print dress caught the light from the front room coming through the window.

"You're a man who has spent much time alone, aren't you," she said. "So mysterious."

He had his hand in his pocket, the ring in his fingers. He hesitated. A couple walking down the sidewalk nodded at them. He couldn't do it out here, where the world might see. "Mrs. Graves, would you come up to my room? I have something I need to show you."

She did not hesitate. "I hope there's nothing wrong."

"No, ma'm. Just something I'd like to rearrange."

He opened the door for her and followed her up the stairs. The clock in the hall ticked loudly. He opened the door to his room and ushered her in, closed the door behind them. When she turned to face him he fell to his knees.

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He held up the ring in both hands, his offering. "Miz Graves, I want you to marry me."

She looked at him kindly, her expression calm. The silence stretched. She reached out; he thought she was going to take the ring, but instead she touched his wrist. "I can't marry you, Mr. Bailey."

"Why not?"

"Why, I hardly know you."

Railroad felt dizzy. "You could some time."

"I'll never marry again, Mr. Bailey. It's not you."

Not him. It was never him, had never *been* him. His knees hurt from the hardwood floor. He looked at the ring, lowered his hands, clasped it in his fist. She moved her hand from his wrist to his shoulder, squeezed it. A knife of pain ran down his arm. Without standing, he punched Mrs. Graves in the stomach.

She gasped and fell back onto the bed. He was on her in a second, one hand over her mouth while he ripped her dress open from the neck. She struggled, and he pulled the pistol out from behind his back and held it to her head. She lay still.

"Don't you stop me, now," he muttered. He tugged his pants down and did what he wanted.

How ladylike it was of her to keep so silent.

Much later, lying on the bed, eyes dreamily focused on the light fixture in the center of the ceiling, it came to him what had bothered him about the grandmother. She had ignored the fact that she was going to die. "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," he'd told Bobby Lee. And that was true. But then, for that last moment, she *became* a good woman. The reason was that, once Railroad convinced her she was going to die, she could forget about it. In the end, when she reached out to him, there was no thought in her mind about death, about the fact that he had killed her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren and was soon going to kill her. All she wanted was to comfort him. She didn't even care if he couldn't be comforted. She was living in that exact instant, with no memory of the past or regard for the future, out of the instinct of her soul and nothing else.

Like the cat. Pleasure lived that way all the time. The cat didn't know

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about Jesus' sacrifice, about angels and devils. That cat looked at him and saw what was there.

He raised himself on his elbows. Mrs. Graves lay very still beside him, her blond hair spread across the pineapple quilt. He felt her neck for a pulse.

It was dark night now: the whine of insects in the oaks outside the window, the rush of traffic on the cross street, drifted in on the hot air. Quietly, Railroad slipped out into the hall and down to Foster's room. He put his ear to the door and heard no sound. He came back to his own room, wrapped Mrs. Graves in the quilt and, as silently as he could, dragged her into his closet. He closed the door.

Railroad heard purring, and saw Pleasure sitting on the table, watching. "God damn you. God damn you to hell," he said to the cat, but before he could grab her, the calico had darted out the window.

HE FIGURED IT OUT. The idea of marrying Mrs. Graves had been only a stage in the subtle revenge being taken on him by the dead grandmother, through the cat. The wishes Pleasure had granted were the bait, the nightmare had been a warning. But he hadn't listened.

He rubbed his sore shoulder. The old lady's gesture, like a mustard-seed, had grown to be a great crow-filled tree in Railroad's heart.

A good trick the devil had played on him. Now, no matter how he reformed himself, he could not get rid of what he had done.

It was hot and still, not a breath of air, as if the world were being smothered in a fever blanket. A milk-white sky. The kitchen of the Sweet Spot was hot as the furnace of Hell; beneath his shirt Railroad's sweat ran down to slick the warm pistol slid into his belt. Railroad was fixing a stack of buttermilk pancakes when the detective walked in.

The detective walked over to the counter and sat down on one of the stools. Maisie was not at the counter; she was probably in the ladies' room. The detective took a look around, then plucked a menu from behind the napkin holder in front of him and started reading. On the radio Hank Williams was singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

Quietly, Railroad untied his apron and slipped out of the back door.

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In the alley near the trash barrels he looked out over the lot. He was about to hop the chain link fence when he saw Cauthron's car stopped at the light on the corner.

Railroad pulled out his pistol, crouched behind a barrel and aimed at the space in the lot where Cauthron usually parked. He felt something bump against his leg.

It was Pleasure. "Don't you cross me now," Railroad whispered, pushing the animal away.

The cat came back, put her front paws up on his thigh, purring.

"Damn you! You owe me, you little demon!" he hissed. He let the gun drop, looked down at the cat.

Pleasure looked up at him. "Miaow?"

"What do you want! You want me to stop, do you? Then make it go away. Make it so I never killed nobody."

Nothing happened. It was just a fucking animal. In a rage, he dropped the gun and seized the cat in both hands. She twisted in his grasp, hissing.

"You know what it's like to hurt in your heart?" Railroad tore open his shirt and pressed Pleasure against his chest. "Feel it! Feel it beating there!" Pleasure squirmed and clawed, hatching his chest with a web of scratches. "You owe me! You owe me!" Railroad was shouting now. "Make it go away!"

Pleasure finally twisted out of his grasp. The cat fell, rolled, and scurried away, running right under Cauthron's car as it pulled into the lot. With a little bump, the car's left front tire ran over her.

Cauthron jerked the car to a halt. Pleasure howled, still alive, writhing, trying to drag herself away on her front paws. Her back was broken. Railroad looked at the fence, looked back.

He ran over to Pleasure and knelt down. Cauthron got out of the car. Railroad tried to pick up the cat, but she hissed and bit him. Her sides fluttered with rapid breathing. Her eyes clouded. She rested her head on the gravel.

Railroad had trouble breathing. He looked up from his crouch to see that Maisie and some customers had come out of the diner. Among them was the detective.

"I didn't mean to do that, Lloyd," Cauthron said. "It just ran out in

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front of me." He paused a moment. "Jesus Christ, Lloyd, what happened to your chest?"

Railroad picked up the cat in his bloody hands. "Nobody ever gets away with nothing," he said. "I'm ready to go now."

"Go where?"

"Back to prison."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me and Hiram and Bobby Lee killed all those folks in the woods and took their car. This was their cat."

"What people?"

"Bailey Boy and his mother and his wife and his kids and his baby."

The detective pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "You all best come in here and we'll talk this thing over."

They went into the diner. Railroad would not let them take Pleasure from him until they gave him a corrugated cardboard box to put the body in. Maisie brought him a towel to wipe his hands, and Railroad told the detective, whose name was Vernon Scott Shaw, all about the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and the hearselike Hudson, and the family they'd murdered in the backwoods. Mostly he talked about the grandmother and the cat. Shaw sat there and listened soberly. At the end he folded up his notebook and said, "That's quite a story, Mr. Bailey. But we caught the people who did that killing, and it ain't you."

"What do you mean? I know what I done."

"Another thing, you don't think I'd know if there was some murderer loose from the penitentiary? There isn't anyone escaped."

"What were you doing in here last week, asking questions?"

"I was having myself some pancakes and coffee."

"I didn't make this up."

"So you say. But seems to me, Mr. Bailey, you been standing over a hot stove too long."

Railroad didn't say anything. He felt as if his heart was about to break.

Mr. Cauthron told him he might just as well take the morning off and get some rest. He would man the griddle himself. Railroad got unsteadily to his feet, took the box containing Pleasure's body, and tucked it under his arm. He walked out of the diner.

He went back to the boarding house. He climbed the steps. Mr. Foster

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was in the front room reading the newspaper. "Morning, Bailey," he said. "What you got there?"

"My cat got killed."

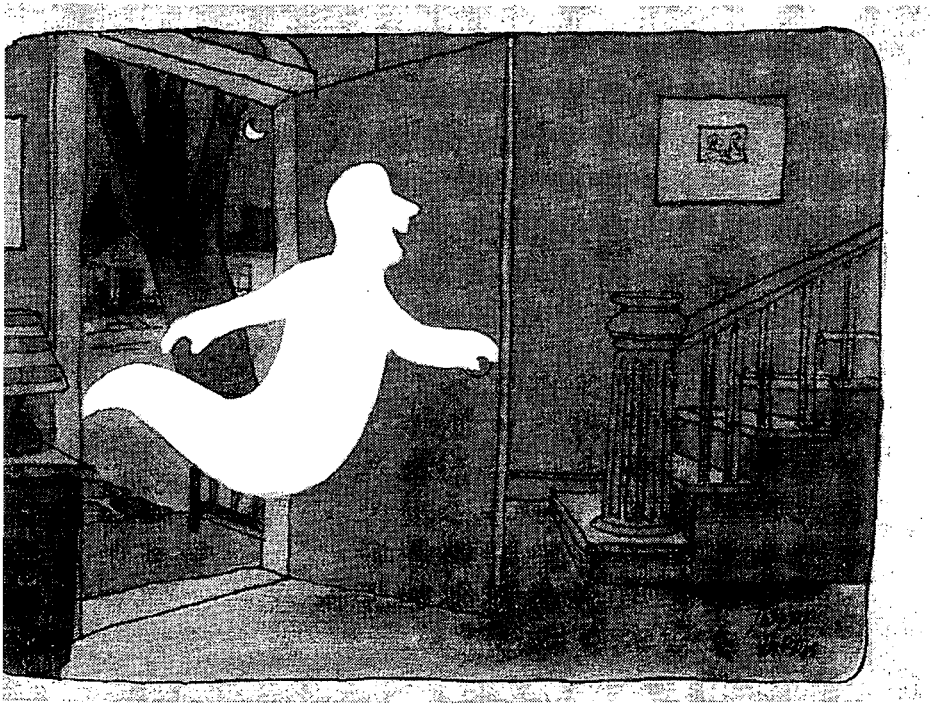
"No! Sorry to hear that."

"You seen Miz Graves this morning?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Railroad climbed the stairs, walked slowly down the hall to his room. He entered. Dust motes danced in the sunlight coming through the window. The ocean rowboat was no darker than it had been the day before. He set the dead cat down next to the Bible on the table. The pineapple quilt was no longer on the bed; now it was the rose. He reached into his pocket and felt the engagement ring.

The closet door was closed. He went to it, put his hand on the doorknob. He turned it and opened the door.



"Sweetie, I'm back from the dead!"

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Rachel Pollack is an international expert on the Tarot, with more than a dozen books to her credit. She has also written for numerous comic books, including Doom Patrol *and* Tomahawk. *More to the point (perhaps), she is also the author of five novels, including* Unquenchable Fire, Temporary Agency, *and* Godmother Night, *which won the World Fantasy Award last year. She writes short fiction much too infrequently, so it's always a real treat when we see a new story from her, as in the case of this delightful fairy tale.*

The Fool, the Stick, and the Princess

By Rachel Pollack

THERE WERE ONCE THREE brothers who lived in a poor country far away. The two older brothers were very clever and everyone said they would do well in the world, even in a land with so few opportunities. But the youngest was nothing but a fool. He had never learned to read, and even the simplest tasks eluded him. Told to fetch wood, he would set out determined to get it right, but before he got to the back of the house and the woodpile he might see a rabbit and try to imitate its hop until he fell over laughing, the woodpile long forgotten. Or worse, he might see a rainbow and fling the wood in the air as he lifted his arms in happiness. The Fool, as everyone called him, simply loved rainbows. Whenever he saw one he would throw his arms high above his head, no matter what else was happening. People would shake their heads and worry what would become of him.

As time went on, the family became poorer and poorer, despite all the efforts of the mother and father and the elder brothers. Finally, the oldest brother announced that there were just no opportunities for an ambitious

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young man in a country where people told legendary stories about eating more than one meal a day. He must leave home and seek his fortune. He kissed his parents, told his second brother to take care of the Fool, and set out on a sunny morning across the cracked clay of their poor farm.

He had gone no more than a day's journey when he spotted something along the side of the road, half-hidden under a burnt-out bush. At first glance it looked like a plain stick, about waist high, but the sharp-eyed brother noticed a glow of light all around it. "A magic staff!" he cried excitedly and seized it. Power surged through him and he shook the stick at the sky. "Now nothing can stop me!" he cried. "I will make my fortune and return home to rescue my family."

Just as he was striding off, he heard a terrible roar. He turned and saw an ogre about to rush at him. The ogre stood ten feet tall, with shoulders like rocks, and thick scales for skin, and teeth like sharpened iron stakes. Though he shook with fear, the eldest brother told himself he had no reason to worry. He pointed the magic stick at the ogre and shouted "Stop this monster from devouring me!" A blast of light streaked from the stick — but instead of striking the ogre it ran all through the eldest brother. In an instant his entire body had turned to stone. Furious, the hungry ogre lumbered away.

A year went by. When Spring came once more, the second brother looked one day at the scraps of bread on the table and shook his head. "It's no use," he told his parents. "Something terrible must have happened to my brother or he would have returned by now. We have become more wretched than ever. I must go seek my fortune." His parents begged him not to go. If he didn't come back, they said, and they died, who would take care of the Fool? But he only kissed them and shook his head sadly at his younger brother. Then he left.

Three days from home he came upon his petrified brother. The magic stick still lay at his stone feet. "Oh my poor poor brother," he cried. "He must have found this magic stick and tried to use it and it turned against him." He picked up the stick. The power in it made him tremble all over. "Well," he said. "Luckily I am much cleverer than my brother. Besides, he always wanted glory. I just want to feed my family. As long as I don't make any mistakes I can use this stick to make my fortune."

He had gone no more than a day's journey when he heard a roar. An

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ogre was rushing at him. Its mouth drooled with thick black slime. The brother raised his stick. He could see fire run along its length in its eagerness to unleash itself. "Prevent this creature from devouring me!" he ordered the stick. Just as the ogre reached him he turned all to stone.

Another year passed. One day the Fool said "Didn't my brothers leave some time ago? I remember something about that." His parents nodded. "They haven't come back, have they?" His parents shook their heads. "Oh," said the Fool, "I guess that means I'll have to go seek my fortune."

"No!" his parents cried. They knew he could hardly find his way out the door. But nothing they said could dissuade him. Maybe he'd forget. They tried to distract him, with stories, and games, and a bunch of flowers that his mother begged from a neighbor who had managed to grow a small garden. The next morning, however, the Fool tied a change of clothes in a large cloth and set out.

No sooner had he left the house than he saw a rainbow. "Oh look!" he cried, and raised his arms, flinging his bundle away from him. His poor father had to run after it or the Fool would have forgotten it entirely. As the Fool wandered up the road, his parents held each other and wept loudly.

The Fool had traveled several days, with detours to follow various small animals, when he came upon his petrified eldest brother. "How wonderful," he said. "Here we all thought something terrible must have happened, but instead someone's made a statue of him. He must be famous. How nice. He always wanted to be famous."

Several more days later, he discovered his second brother. "Now our family has really done well," he said. "Statues of both my brothers. Won't my parents be happy. Maybe someone will make a statue of me someday." As soon as he said it, the idea struck him as so ludicrous he bent over laughing. With his face close to the ground like that, he discovered the stick at his brother's feet. "Oh look," he said. "Just what I need to carry my bundle." He tied his cloth to the end of the stick and lifted it to his shoulder. A tickle ran all through his body. "What a nice breeze," he said to himself.

That night he used his stick to dig up some roots for his dinner. To his surprise they tasted like a marvelous feast, with flavors from roast quail to wild strawberries crème de menthe. "What amazing roots," he thought.

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"I'll have to tell my brothers about this." With the stick he drew an outline of a bed on the dirt. When he lay down on it he found it as soft as baby goose feathers. He smiled and fell asleep.

He had hardly set out the next morning when the ground shook with a great roar. "Thunder," he said to himself. "I hope the rain falls on something else and not me." Behind him, a sudden burst of rain like knives fell on the ogre who had just opened his mouth wide to bite off the Fool's head. As the rain hit him the ogre screamed, for ogres cannot stand water. He thrashed about but it was no use. The scales cracked, the skin underneath sizzled and burned. Finally the creature fell down dead.

"I wonder what all that noise was," the Fool said. He walked away without turning around.

For several weeks he wandered. Each day his stick dug up banquets in the form of roots, and every night he slept peacefully in his outline of a bed, untouched by animals or storms or even damp.

One day he came to a river. Beyond it he could see houses and fields, even a city, and somewhere near the city what looked like a tower of light. He wondered how he could get across. It was too far to swim and he could not see a bridge. "If only I was clever like my brothers and not such a fool," he thought, "I would know what to do." In a rare burst of annoyance he struck his stick against a tree. "I wish I had a boat!" he said. He heard a crackle, and when he turned around the tree had gone and in its place lay a fine rowboat. "How nice," the Fool said, as he got in and began rowing. "Someone just left this for strangers. What a generous land. Maybe here I can find my fortune."

When he reached the other side he found signs posted up and down the riverbank. Since he could not read he paid them no attention, and began walking toward the tower of light which shimmered and flickered in the bright sun. In fact, the signs were all about the tower.

The king and queen of this land had a daughter who was so beautiful that princes from lands as exotic as Cathay, Persia, and England all sent delegations asking for her hand in marriage. Some even came in person and bowed down with great flourishes (and expensive presents) to press their case. Her parents considered the princess a gift from heaven itself, for they could pick a husband who would bring even more wealth and power to their kingdom. Empire, they told each other. Through their daughter's

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marriage they would change from mere king and queen to emperor and empress.

Unfortunately, when they had calculated the best possible match for the princess, they discovered that the gods had played an awful trick on them. Their daughter refused to marry! At first, they thought they might have gone a little too far in their choice. The prospective husband was not exactly young, and the warts on his bent nose and saggy chin ruled out any suggestion of handsome. So they found a prince whose good looks caused young women to faint any time he walked down an open street (newspaper editorials suggested he wear a veil, or simply stay home, but the prince only laughed). Again the princess refused.

"What do you want?" her parents shouted at her. "Just tell us."

"I want to study," she said.

They stared at her. Study? They knew she spent a great deal of time with her books, rather odd books, in fact, but study? They'd always assumed she'd read all those books because she was bored and waiting to get married. Study rather than a husband?

They arranged one match after another. The princess refused to see them. Now they became truly angry. They told her they would choose a husband for her and she would marry the man, even if the palace slaves had to drag her from her precious library.

For the first time the princess became frightened. Until now she'd thwarted them by her will and by the good sense of prospective husbands who knew how miserable an unwilling wife could make them. But suppose her parents chose some brute who would relish forcing his wife to obey him? Suppose he took away her books?

Usually the princess did not study anything very practical. She preferred instead to ponder the mysteries of creation and the secret discoveries of ancient philosophers. Nevertheless, some of her books did contain a few magic formulas, if only to show the writer's disdain for such ordinary concerns. For days she searched through her books (she'd never gotten around to putting them in any order) until at last she came upon something truly useful.

While the palace slept the princess secretly borrowed a wheelbarrow from the gardener and carted all her books out to an open field. Standing in the middle of them, she cast a spell. A glass tower rose up beneath her,

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so steep and smooth that no one could possibly climb it. On top of it sat the delighted princess and all her books. Safe! She clapped her hands in joy. A moment later, she had opened one of her favorite works, a treatise on creation told from the viewpoint of trees instead of people.

Several hours later a noise disturbed her. She peered down the edge of the tower to see her parents there, waving their arms and stamping their feet. They screamed, they cursed, they threatened to tear down the glass mountain chip by chip. She paid no attention. Finally, her mother pointed out that she had taken no food with her. If she didn't come down and obey them she would starve.

Not so, the princess knew. As part of her years of study, she had learned the language of the birds. In a pure voice she sang out to them and they brought her whatever she needed. When her parents heard her song and saw the birds deliver her fruits and fish eggs and delicacies stolen from wealthy tables they finally knew she had beaten them.

Still they would not give up entirely. They sent out messages to all the princes and kings they could reach that whoever could climb the glass tower and bring down the princess could marry her on the spot. They even put up signs all about the land to announce this challenge. Secretly they hoped some lout would be the one to get her. It would serve her right, they told themselves.

The Fool knew none of this, for signs meant nothing to him. Music, however — Just as the Fool started toward the glass tower the princess began her song. The Fool stopped and closed his eyes. Tears spilled out from beneath the lids to slide down into his wide smile. Never, never, had he heard such a wondrous sound. When it ended, and he opened his eyes, he saw birds of all colors and sizes, condors, parrots, humming birds, all of them in a great swirl around the top of the tower. Quickly he walked toward the light and the birds.

As he approached it he saw men, more and more of them as he got closer, most of them injured in some way, and all of them miserable. They hobbled about on crutches, they held bandaged heads in their hands, a few lay on the ground in the middle of broken contraptions. One man had strapped giant wood and cloth wings to his back, then jumped off a tree, hoping to flap his way up the tower. He'd only fallen on his head. Another had made shoes with wire springs so that he might

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bounce high enough to reach the princess. He'd only crashed into the side of the glass.

The Fool looked around at all these sad figures. "What happened to all of you?" he asked.

One of the men stopped groaning long enough to look up at the Fool's cheerful face. "What are you?" he said, "Some kind of fool?"

The Fool nodded happily. "That's right," he said. He thought he might have found a friend but the man only groaned more loudly and turned away.

"Well," the Fool said to himself, "if I want to climb to the top I better get started." He set the stick down on the base of the tower in order to brace himself. A step formed in the glass. He placed the stick a little ways up and then another step formed. "This is easy," he said. "I don't know why all those men made such a fuss. I'm just a Fool, but even I can find my way up a bunch of steps."

When he reached the top the princess stood there. She was furious! She pulled at her hair, she twisted her face in anger, she hopped up and down. Even so, the Fool thought her the most wonderful being he had ever seen.

"What are you doing here?" she shouted. "Why can't anyone ever leave me alone? How did you get up the tower?"

Her fury so startled the Fool he could hardly speak. "I...I just climbed up the steps. It wasn't very hard. Really it wasn't."

Now the princess stared at the glass steps. Then she looked at the Fool, and then at his stick, which shone with a soft pink glow. She nodded to herself. Again she looked at the Fool. She could see a light in him purer than the magic of his stick.

Still she refused to let go of her anger. "So," she said. "Now you expect me to marry you?"

"Marry you?" the Fool said. "*Marry* you? I could never think to marry someone as wise and wonderful as you. I'm just a Fool. I only came here because of the singing. I just wanted to hear you sing with the birds." He began to cry.

The princess felt her heart dissolve and flow out of her body. No, she told herself, she would not allow any tricks. "Right," she said sarcastically. "And I suppose you didn't see all the signs my father has planted everywhere."

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The Fool said "I saw them, but I don't know what they said. I can't read."

The princess's mouth fell open. She stared and stared at him. How sweet he looked, how kind, how honest. "Will you marry me?" she blurted.

"What?" the Fool said. He looked around at the piles and piles of books, some as high as a house, some arranged like a table or a bed. "Marry you? I.... How could I marry you? I just told you, I can't read."

"That's so wonderful," the princess cried. "I read more than enough for any two people. We will be perfect together." She began to sing the song a partridge hen sings when she has found the perfect mate. The Fool closed his eyes and became so swept up in joy he would have fallen right off the tower if the princess had not held on tightly to him. She stopped singing finally and kissed him. "We will be so happy," she said.

"Oh yes," he told her. "Yes!"

Before they went down from the tower, the princess looked at her beloved Fool and his ragged clothes. "Hmm," she said. To her he was perfect in every way, but she knew what her father would think of such a husband, and even though the king had said he would marry her to whoever climbed the tower she feared he would try to stop them. "Do you have any other clothes?" she asked him.

He looked at the bundle on the end of the stick. "Well," he said. "I did bring an extra shirt and trousers, just in case I had to give these to somebody who needed them more than me. But I'm afraid my other clothes have just as many holes as the ones I am wearing." He reached down and untied the bundle for the first time since he'd placed it on his stick. Then he gasped in surprise. His ragged clothes had vanished and in their place lay the softest and most elegant tunic and leggings anyone had ever seen, softer than silk, stronger than wool, with a river of colors woven into the fabric. The Fool scratched his head. "Now where did this come from?" he said.

Once the Fool had dressed, the princess called the larger birds, the condors and rocs and vultures, and asked them if they would carry her books down to the ground. Then she took her sweet Fool's hand and together they walked down the steps of the tower.

The king and queen were delighted to see their daughter married at

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last, and to such a fine prince — or so they thought, for when they asked him his kingdom he just waved his stick and said "Oh, over there," and each of them saw a vision of fields of diamonds growing like berries, and castles as large as mountains. They offered to have the Fool and their daughter live with them, but their new son-in-law said "No, thank you. I promised my mother and father I'd come right home as soon as I made my fortune." He wondered why the king and queen laughed, but he thought it rude to ask too many questions (he so rarely understood the things other people said anyway), so he said nothing. They set out with seven horses, one for the Fool, one for the princess, one for the treasures the king and queen were sending to the Fool's parents, and four for the princess's books.

Just as they approached the river, the ground shook and they heard a roar like the earth itself breaking in two. The princess turned around and saw a whole army of ogres racing toward them! Word had gotten to the creatures of their brother's destruction and now they wanted revenge. *They'll tear us to shreds*, the princess thought. *We have to do something.* But what could they do? There stood the river, too wide for them to swim across, and besides, what would happen to her books in the water? She looked up at the sky but there were no birds near enough to come to their rescue. Knowing that the ogres would reach them in just a few minutes, she began frantically to search through her books for the ones on magic. If only, she thought, as she raced from horse to horse, she had paid more attention to practical issues.

The Fool meanwhile paid no attention at all to any of these events. He did hear the noise and felt the ground shake but thought it might be a herd of animals running back and forth to enjoy the day. And he did wonder why his bride kept dashing from one horse to another, but trusted her totally, for after all, she was so much wiser than he. He might have wondered how they would cross the river, for someone had taken away the rowboat, except that right then, on the other side of the river, he saw his favorite sight in all the world (after his wife, of course). A rainbow!

The Fool did what he always did when he saw a rainbow, he raised his arms above his head to greet it. This time, however, he held the stick in his hand. The moment he lifted his arms, the entire river separated before him. The water rose up on either side, huge walls of water high enough to

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block the sky. You see, the Fool's stick was a very *old* magic stick, and it knew some very special tricks.

"Hurry," the princess urged as she spurred her horse, and the pack horses, across the passageway between the walls of water. The Fool laughed, thinking his wife wanted to exercise the horses, and so he galloped alongside her.

The princess looked over her shoulder. There came the ogres, filling the path, coming closer and closer. By the time she and the Fool and their horses reached the other side the entire army of ogres raced between the watery walls. *What can we do?* she thought. *They'll swallow us.*

The Fool glanced back, curious to see what his wife was looking at with such distress. All he could make out was a cloud of dust. "Now that's not right," he said to himself. "People depend on this river. What will happen if the water just stays piled up like that? I sure wish the river would come back down again." The moment he said it, the walls of water crashed down in a furious whirl of waves. The entire army of ogres washed away and was never heard from again.

Now they set out happily for home. Anytime the Fool got lost (at least four or five times a day) the princess called a hawk or a raven to look ahead and return them to the path. They were two days from home when they came upon the Fool's second brother, still fixed in stone in the act of trying to cast a spell. "Look," the Fool said to his wife. "Not everyone in my family is a fool. My second brother has become so famous someone has made a statue of him." With his stick he tapped twice on the shoulder.

Instantly his brother came to life, falling to the ground where he looked up confused. "What..." he said. "Where am I?"

"Brother!" cried the Fool and gave him a big hug. "What a nice surprise. Look, this is my wife, she's a princess, imagine that. Your foolish brother married to a genuine princess. And look, here's our treasure, a whole lot of it, or so my wife tells me, and here are all her books." He helped his confused brother onto his own horse and walked alongside, caught up in a happy chatter. Just as the path turned around the side of a hill, the Fool glanced back. To himself he said, "I wonder what happened to that statue?"

A day later they came to the first brother. Once again the Fool tapped the shoulder with the stick, and once again his brother came to life. Now

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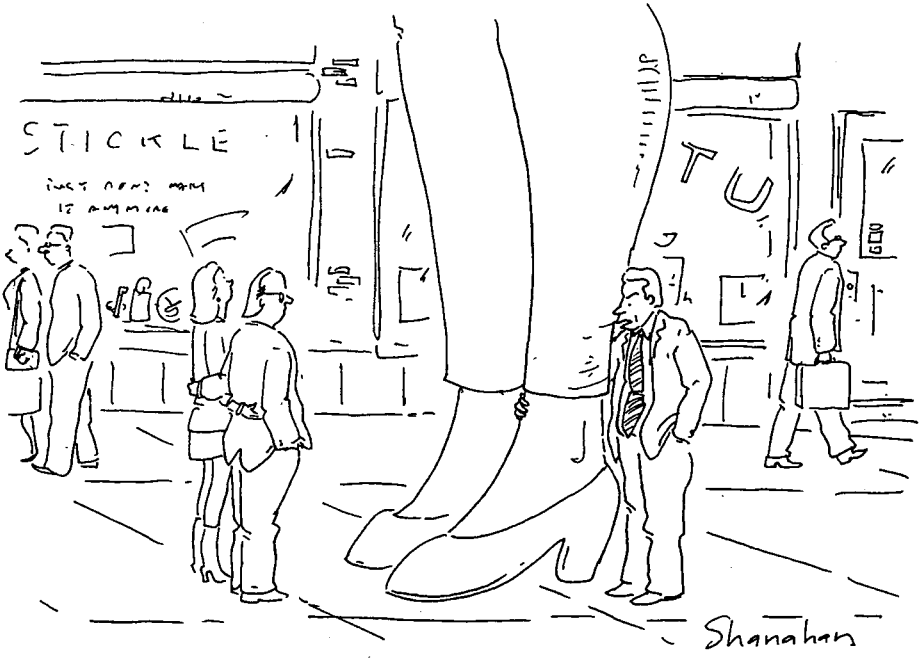
they all traveled together, and when the Fool's parents saw them they wept with joy. With one of the jewels from the treasure chest they bought food and laid out a feast. Just as they all sat down to eat, the oldest brother suddenly remembered what had started them all on their adventures. "The staff," he said, "what happened to the magic staff?"

"Do you mean my walking stick?" the Fool said. "When we came close to home I realized I didn't need it anymore, so I threw it away."

"You threw it away?" both brothers repeated. "Where?"

The Fool shrugged. He saw his wife look at him with laughter and love and smiled back at her. "I don't remember," he said. "I just tossed it in some bushes."

And there it remains to this very day.



"Gianteſs, as if she even hears you."

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Around the beginning of this decade, Judith Moffett won lots of acclaim with her stories of the Hefn—gnomelike aliens who turned out to be anything but cute when they began enforcing their Directive for humans to live on Earth without destroying it. The Hefn played a role in the novels The Ragged World *and* Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream, *and then Judy took some time off to put her principles to practice: she spent a year tending gardens and raising ducks in a Philadelphia suburb, and eventually wrote up the experience in* Homestead Year. *She then moved to Salt Lake City, where she wrote this novella, and now she is dividing her time between homes in Cincinnati and Philadelphia.*

"The Bradshaw" marks her return to short fiction powerfully. While the aliens do put in an appearance here, this story is primarily about one human coming to terms with the abuse in her past, returning to that other country through means only science fiction can afford. The results are sometimes harrowing and disturbing (much like life can be), and ultimately they're truly rewarding.

The Bradshaw

By Judith Moffett

Backward, turn backward, oh! time in your flight
Make me a child again, just for tonight.
—"Rock Me to Sleep, Mother," popular Civil War song

1

MY MOTHER LEFT ME A bradshaw when she died, along with her house on the Scofield College campus, together with all its contents, and my father's guaranteed pension with six years left to run.

The bradshaw was a surprise, to put it mildly. Anything to do with alien technology was so horrendously expensive for an average citizen, I figured she had to have scrimped for nearly a decade to buy it, starting not too long after I'd told her the truth about Dad, which was several years after he died in 2023. Had he still been alive at the time, I knew she wouldn't have let a word of my story slip past her defenses. As it was, she

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remained deeply vested in her own version of their marriage, and after that one occasion she refused to talk about it any more. The bradshaw was my first clue that, over time, she must have begun to acknowledge there could have been something to what I'd said.

It wasn't like she didn't already know what Dad had done, or a lot of what he'd done. But her own father had died when she was little. She'd always thought that just having a daddy must be the most wonderful thing in the world, and took it on faith that whatever Dad did to me was normal. He was my father, wasn't he? For all she knew, any father might take an obsessive interest in his daughter's extremely large breasts and talk about them constantly. Or assume a spraddle-legged stance before his daughter and her girlfriend, both young teenagers, to ask if they could tell whether he was wearing briefs or boxers under his trousers. Or describe to this daughter, with terrific zest, the circumstances (creek valley after school, big flat rock, older boys) under which he'd been taught to masturbate.

After Dad's death I learned that his obsession with my breasts had been aired even outside the family circle. "I think it's terrible the way Shelby talks about Pam's boobs all the time, and I don't understand why Frances just laughs," a friend of my parents' told her daughter, who eventually told me. "And remember those tight sweaters your mom used to stuff you into?" Betsy added, recalling a certain deep-pink lambswool number with short sleeves and a little round collar, and a row of pearl buttons down the swollen front.

I remembered, all right. Why hadn't I refused to wear those sweaters, chosen for and pressed upon me by Mom, Dad's former sweater girl? Considering how violently I loathed my huge breasts, why oh why had the sweaters I went out and bought for myself fit the same way? After years of therapy I sort of understood the storm of conflicting feelings present in every member of a family like mine, but thinking about it still made me queasy.

2

There hadn't been a graduating class at Scofield College, or a full-time standing faculty, since 2028. But Scofield was popular with conference organizers. Our group from the Bureau of Temporal Physics had chosen

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the campus for good reason, but throughout the week we'd spent steaming up and down the river between Scofield Landing and Hurt Hollow in the rain, the managers of Landfill Plastics Inc. had been using the other half of our dorm, and three other dorms were booked up and bustling too.

My house — the one my mother left me — was regularly used by the college as conference lodging. During our conference, naturally, I stayed there myself, and I'd invited my old friend and ex-lover Liam O'Hara to join me there for auld lang syne. Liam and I had trained as BTP Apprentices together; he'd visited me in this house when we were kids. After I lost the mathematical intuition that had qualified me for an Apprenticeship, relations between us had become somewhat erratic and conflicted. Inevitably, they'd worsened after the breakup; but he'd accepted my invitation all the same, probably for the same reason I'd extended it: nostalgia for a distant time we both preferred, in certain ways, to the present.

When the conference was over I went up to Liam's room, my parents' former bedroom, on the morning we'd both planned to leave. I found him packing and marveling at the framed pictures crammed on the top of my mother's big mahogany dresser. "My God, look at us," he said. "When did she take that one?" The picture was a holo of Liam and me in the spring of 2014, when for several weeks we'd lived at Hurt Hollow with the alien Humphrey, our teacher at the Bureau. The Hollow had been a working homestead then, not the museum it had since become, and the goats, bees, and big organic garden had still been the basis of somebody's livelihood. The entire set-up was a powerful, attractive model of the sort of lifestyle the Hefn had been trying to encourage.

During our visit to Scofield the homesteader, a friend of mine since my earliest childhood, had been bitten by a copperhead. Liam and I had been helping out while he recovered, and Humphrey'd dropped in at Liam's suggestion to check the place out. I had a treasured memory of Humphrey on the terrace at Hurt Hollow one morning, in a chair that tried to make his legs bend the wrong way, pausing in the rapid spooning of blackberries and yogurt into his mouth to ask, "Do you clever children know, either of you, how to cook a 'cobbler'?" I could see his spoon clutched in a hand like a tongs, two short hairy fingers opposing two others, and the gray hair around his mouth, sticky with honey and stained with berry juice. At that moment Humphrey had been one happy Hefn.

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But not for long.

In the holo, Liam was standing on the same terrace with a brimming pail of goat's milk in each hand, grinning at the camera; he was wearing shorts and a ratty T- shirt and sneakers without socks, and looked as if he hadn't a care in the world (not true). I had started ahead of him down the steep path to the spring house. All you could see of me was a blur of light-colored clothing and another of straight, brown, shoulder-length hair, but even so I had contrived to look both furtive and embarrassed, an impression emphasized by Liam's own sunny, open good looks.

The picture made me feel somewhere between weird and desolate. "That was that time Mom and Dorothy What's-her-name stopped by the Hollow, right after Humphrey came, I think. Listen, how long does it take to set up a bradshaw?"

Liam looked up sharply from this ambiguous image of our shared past. "A bradshaw? I never handled one, I dunno — couple of days? Why? Oh," he said before I could answer. "The one your mother left you! Thinking of shooting it while you're here in the neighborhood, are you?" He folded his arms and smirked at me across the bed.

"Just tell me, how do I arrange to get one set up on short notice? I need to get back, I probably shouldn't take more than a couple of extra days out here."

Before he could reply, his pocket phone dinged. I leaned against the wall while he talked to Bureau Headquarters, glancing back and forth between the live Liam and the holo of the Goatherd, considering how that handsome, cheerful-looking kid had been transformed into the balding, restless, dissatisfied, thirty-eight-year-old person in the BTP uniform, hunkered among tumbled sheets on my parents' old four-poster, taking notes on a Landfill Plastics pad.

As the conversation wound down he glanced up and caught me at the back-and-forthing. "Hold it a second, Johnny — do you know how to set up a bradshaw on short notice?"

The little squeak of John Wong's voice came through while Liam looked at me. "Pam Pruitt," he said, eyes on mine, "in southern Indiana. Or maybe northern Kentucky?" I nodded. "She inherited one from her mom, and she wants to get it shot while she's out here — she's here for the conference too."

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Johnny's voice squeaked again. To my ear it had a surprised sound, and I imagined him saying, "Pam's there? Why?" and felt my face get hot.

But actually he was asking something else. "As a matter of fact, I do," said Liam, "Haven't used it, though, the weather's been terrible till today." He listened. "Come on, somebody else must be in the neighborhood. Artie and Ray were here till yesterday, aren't they still around? I've never done a bradshaw in my life."

"Let me talk to him," I said.

"Pam wants to talk to you." Liam clicked on the room mike and aimed the phone at me.

"Hi, Johnny."

"Hi." His tiny face on the screen grinned a tiny grin. "I never knew you owned a bradshaw."

"Listen, I don't want Liam put in charge of this, if that's what you've been leading up to."

"You haven't got a lot of choice if you want to shoot it now," he said. "Artie and Ray are already in Canada on special assignment. And bradshaws are tricky, we usually get a couple months' advance notice. What was this, some kind of spur-of-the-moment decision?"

"Yeah. Scofield is where I'm from. I don't get back here very often, and I've been busy as hell."

"The thing is, Liam's got a transceiver with him," Johnny said, a fact that was certainly news to me. I darted a surprised, offended look at Liam, who shrugged. "He's your only hope. We can spare him for a few more days, that's all, and I wouldn't go that far for anybody but you. Humphrey wouldn't, I should say. If you don't want him to shoot it, you'll have to wait and go through the usual procedural web work."

While I hesitated, trying to assess pros and cons, Liam clicked off the mike and clapped the phone to his ear. "Hey, before you start disposing of my weekend, I need to get back, I've got plans and I'm beat. Pam can do this bradshaw some other time...okay. Okay. I'll let you know. See ya tomorrow. Bye."

He folded the phone and slipped it back into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket. "Don't look at me like that. There wasn't any reason to tell you."

He'd been hiding the transceiver in my own house. "Listen, for the

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last time, I don't like you sneaking around sparing my feelings. The more you do that, the more you rub it in that the rest of you consider me a tragic victim, and that's not how I want to think of myself, so do me a favor, okay? Cut it out."

"You're the boss." Liam reached under the bed and pulled out a transceiver in its case, along with a family of dust bunnies; the housekeeping staff was getting sloppy. He didn't look at me.

I'd lost my mathematical intuition when my father died. In Liam's view this was a tragedy; it embarrassed him to remind me that his gift was still vital when mine was not — that he was a starter and I now only a bench warmer in the world-saving game Humphrey had trained us both to play. My therapist, who'd once been Liam's, hypothesized that my intuitive ability had developed so I'd have a means of escaping an intolerable situation, and that when I hadn't needed it anymore it had simply shut down. This "instrumentalist" view of things horrified Liam, to whom the thought of losing intuition, and therefore attunement with the time transceivers, felt like losing some essential power, eyesight, or sexual potency.

Since I put a lot of energy into denying that it horrified me as well, and since I was deathly serious about not wanting to think of myself as a Poor Thing, this conference — which I'd attended under protest, at Humphrey's insistence — had given me a wretched week.

We'd convened to brainstorm about ways of using the transceivers to address the developing worldwide Baby-Ban crisis: where in civilized time had a human population stabilized its numbers and sustained them? What were the means, the incentives, the geophysical circumstances? Where could we look that we hadn't looked already? Because the Hefn insisted that if the model wasn't somewhere in our past, it wasn't going to be anywhere in our future.

All through the discussions, urgent and fascinating though they were, I'd been acutely conscious every instant of my sidelined situation, and of the overpolite attentiveness of my colleagues whenever I tossed out an idea that somebody else would have to follow up on. The conferees, mostly Bureau techs, would have given a lot to have me up and running again — I'd been very good at my job while I was doing it — but under the circumstances they couldn't see, any better than I could, why Humphrey

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had insisted that I attend. Even the Hefn Alfrey, who was running the show in place of the hibernating Humphrey, obviously had no idea what I was doing there. So Liam's pity was the last thing I wanted right now.

Were it not for my lost gift, of course, I also wouldn't now be in the position of pleading with Johnny Wong to order some other tech to drop everything, requisition a transceiver, and make his way overland to the Ohio River Valley to do a job I could once have done for myself with one hand tied behind me. I needn't have even considered allowing Liam to make the bradshaw for me, let alone trying to persuade him to, let alone — the ultimate humiliation — exploiting his pity to get him to agree.

It was all too much. I still wasn't really sure I even wanted a bradshaw.

I opened my mouth to say so, but Liam beat me to the punch. "Okay, I'll do the shoot, but that's all. I'm on that plane tonight whatever, I'm not crossing the blinking continent by rail. You can keep the recording and have the virtual program written after you get back to Salt Lake. Take it or leave it. That's my best offer."

3

I WAS ELEVEN when the Hefn took control of the world, and fourteen when they delivered me, temporarily, from my family difficulties.

Because the Earth was in such terrible ecological shape when the Hefn arrived, their first priority was to reverse the process of destruction, get humans to stop overbreeding and squandering their nonrenewable resources. It was to accomplish this that they gave us the Directive, and punished those who wouldn't abide the rules by removing their memories. They didn't want to annihilate us, but they could have, and they used the veiled threat of total destruction, and the applied threat of mindwipe, to get us to cooperate. Except, of course, too many of us wouldn't.

When the Hefn realized we weren't going to mend our ruinous ways and stop destroying our planet just because they said so, then they did seriously consider eliminating us. But some among them persuaded the rest to try a different approach. A handful of mathematically gifted kids — me included — were recruited to be Apprentices, to go and live in

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Washington DC at the newly created Bureau of Temporal Physics. There the Hefn Humphrey trained us to operate the time transceivers that, by opening a window upon our past, might reveal a moment or moments in human history when our relationship to our world had been balanced and sustainable. Then humanity would have a useful model for the right way to live upon the Earth, or so they reasoned.

Meanwhile — and this was critical — they imposed a worldwide moratorium on fertility. Even some of the people who approved of their goals in general hated the aliens because of the Baby Ban. I heard the Hefn called fascists and dictators, and benevolent dictators, of course, is precisely what they were. Humanity would eventually judge the Ban a means that could not justify its end, and act accordingly.

But I liked it at the BTP. I liked my teacher, Humphrey, and what I was learning to do, and I liked being fussed over by the media. I settled in and worked hard. Absent my mother's pressuring and my father's intrusive scrutiny, I spent the rest of my adolescence as an egghead in tent-like tee shirts and sweatshirts, which, while they did not conceal the difficulty, had the virtue of failing to emphasize it.

4

Beginning about the year 2025, in the fifteenth year of their presence on Earth, the Hefn had gone into the bradshaw business in a small way by making their time transceivers available to individuals for personal use. Somebody might give a bradshaw as a gift for a really special occasion, or make one for herself to use therapeutically. Those who'd tried therapy à la bradshaw mostly raved about the results — I'd seen a viddy documentary to that effect — but not many people had; apart from movie stars and business tyros, hardly anybody could afford the things. Hefn time transceivers are very expensive to run. We Apprentices used them so commonly that we seldom thought about the fortunes being spent on our training. But the media always emphasized the staggering price tag, whenever yet another glittering personality arrived at the decision to buy a bradshaw.

The Hefn didn't offer employee discounts; Mom couldn't have gone behind my back to buy one from Humphrey for cheap.

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A time transceiver is the rarest object on Earth. The process — and the expense — began when one of these priceless artifacts was liberated from its usual function and removed to the site where the event to be revisited had occurred. Then somebody had to set coordinates, a Hefn or a BTP tech, because nobody else knew how. Then they needed someone to record the event (if at all possible, without being noticed), somebody to write the virtual program, and a therapist to guide the client through the experience of running the bradshaw after it was made. A Hefn might also be required, to wipe memories, if anybody back in the past happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Committed to preventing abuses — the potential for abuse, by child pornographers and sadists and the like, was obvious — the Hefn kept scrupulous track of every completed program. Each had to be filed at a public VR parlor and played only there. You could therefore never be sure, while running your bradshaw, that a Hefn Observer wasn't looking in.

Transceivers had to open the time window upon the actual site of the event. A person couldn't sit comfortably in Boston and look in on one of her father's alcoholic rages in Topeka; she had to *go* to Topeka, to the actual house she'd lived in at the time, if it was still there, or to whatever building or abandoned freeway or rubble field presently occupied the space, and set up the equipment there.

The traveling itself could be cumbersome enough. When King William V made a bradshaw to replay a certain painful scene with his father, he'd had to sail the royal yacht *Britannia* to New Zealand, with a time transceiver and assorted technicians on board. The Hefn decided who got to fly in a plane, and a king's desire to experience a virtual intervention in his own past was no reason, in their view, to authorize a flight.

Until the moment my mother's will was read, the idea of *my* making a bradshaw had literally never crossed my mind; and after I owned one — or a voucher that could be exchanged for one — I was conflicted about what to do with it. On the one hand, conventional therapy had already helped me confront and deal with my feelings about my father; on the other, despite the relief I'd derived from that, I was still pretty much of a mess. Obviously there was more work to do; but my several attempts to dig deeper had produced killer anxiety and no further information, and left me sick of the whole struggle. Frankly, had I not felt that the bradshaw

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represented a final communication from my mother — a sign that she'd taken my allegations seriously after all — I might very well have sold the thing.

Even if I'd been downright eager to make this bradshaw, I still needed to get back to Scofield, Indiana, to record it, and ordinarily that wasn't easy. Scofield College — where my father had been Director of Libraries, where I'd lived the first fourteen years of my life before the Hefn whisked me away to DC and safety — was a long way from Salt Lake City, and my early life equally far from my present posting as Hefn Emissary to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or so it usually seemed. I seldom went home even while my mother was still alive. We were uneasy with each other, and overland long-distance travel was exhausting and expensive enough without the stress of a filial visit at the end.

Probably I would never have gotten around to making my bradshaw if Humphrey hadn't decided the brainstorming session about the Baby Ban should be held at Hurt Hollow, and that I had to be there. As it was, not once during that long week — not until the day of my own scheduled departure, when it was almost too late — did my unconscious relent, and let the idea occur to me that, since I was here anyway, what about the bradshaw?

The thought threw me instantly into a state of urgency verging on panic. The bradshaw! Why hadn't I recognized this trip as the golden opportunity it was, and arranged to make the bradshaw while I was here? I couldn't imagine what was wrong with me, to overlook something so obvious.

On second thought, yes I could. I'd overlooked the obvious so I wouldn't have to decide whether to make the thing.

It was in this muddled state that I'd gone looking for Liam.

5

The house at Hurt Hollow had been my home for several years of young adulthood, between the death of its previous owner, Jesse Kellum, and its transformation into a museum. Liam stood just off the terrace, around the corner of the house — in almost the exact spot where his Goat Boy picture had been taken — and fussed with his instruments; I sat on the

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stone step, munching a sandwich, looking around. Being committed to a definite course of action made me feel calm and clear-minded, ready for whatever might be coming.

Liam and I had visited here together as teens at exactly this time of year, mid-April. The trees were a lot bigger now but their leaves were the same bright varieties of green as before, and were as full of noisy birds — birds whose songs were intelligible to me, unlike those of the western species I'd not yet gotten to know very well. Beyond the fence, the pale-blue river spread out forever, as it had through all the springs of my life, though the beach where Liam and I — and Humphrey — had gone swimming in 2014 had been scoured away completely. "Thanks for coming back over here," I told him humbly. "The weather was so lousy all week, I didn't really get a chance to take all this in, and we were too busy anyway."

Liam looked up distractedly. "I'm too busy now. Don't talk to me for ten more minutes."

"Sorry."

He was rushing, bound and determined to make that plane. He'd pressured me to pick an event that had occurred back at the house in Scofield, or someplace on the campus, or our canoe launching from Scofield Beach twenty-three Aprils ago — he'd actually witnessed *that* ghastliness himself — but I'd held out for the Hollow at the cost in time of a five-mile taxi ride and a ferry crossing, and he'd grumpily given in.

I finished my sandwich and got up. "I guess I'll walk down to the dock. Yell when you're ready."

All sixty-one acres of wooded river bluff had been fenced in long ago, while Jesse was still alive, and today, thanks to our conference, the place was still closed to visitors; we had it to ourselves. Descending the steep path from the terrace to the gate, I thought again how different this country was from the mountains and deserts of Utah, and how the Hollow was still and always the one place on Earth that I belonged to, heart and soul, mind and strength — the one place that was absolutely mine, though the deed was registered now in the name of the Hurt Hollow Trust, and I never came back anymore. I wouldn't have used such language to a living soul, Liam least of all, but this — cluster of buildings, wooded hillside, stretch of river — was my heart's home.

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Unfortunately, Liam knew this anyway, without being told. In my opinion we knew far too much about each other for the good of either.

I unlocked the gate and cut down toward the dock. The past winter's currents and storm waves had undermined the bank to the point where the trustees were considering moving the fence to higher ground, and I kept back from the edge. The dinged-up metal buckled and boomed as I walked out to the end of the dock, shrugging off the thought of sunblock, and sat down to watch the river roll massively by while I got myself as centered as I could.

It wasn't recommended that a bradshaw be undertaken in a rush. The candidate was supposed to ready herself with counseling and meditation before embarking upon her personal time-travel adventure. Of course, I wouldn't be running the virtual program for a while yet. But I was going to watch through the window while Liam made the recording, and knew that whatever I saw was bound to jolt me and that I should prepare myself as best I could.

Liam hadn't even tried to talk me out of watching. He knew it would be a waste of time, and he didn't have time to waste. It was my lookout anyway.

"Ready!" he called finally; and when I'd mounted again to the terrace and joined him, "Okay, what are we looking for?"

The transceiver had been erected on its tripod, a confection of molded black metal and meshwork spread like a cobra's hood. For all my brave talk it hurt me to see it there, see Liam's casual confidence as he moved around it adjusting things, unthinkingly at home in a country where I'd once lived and been happy and could never return to.

I looked away. "April 2013 — I don't know the exact date, you'll have to scroll. Start in the middle of the month and work forward, scanning for Dad and me coming out the front door. We were looking up into those trees over there, up the hill. The time window'll open behind us, I don't think we'll notice a thing."

"Roger." Liam slipped his hands into indentations on the sides of the cobra's hood, and almost at once the area directly in front of it began to shimmer and then swirl, forming a pattern in the air.

I moved off the terrace and around the corner of the house, ready to flatten myself against the wall to be out of the way when the window

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opened. I hadn't seen a temporal field in formation for years, but I could still read patterns, and followed as the field shaped itself around the early twenty-first century, then 2013, then spring, then April.

Liam was concentrating, leaning into the transceiver's field with his eyes closed, deepening his trance. When the pattern entered his mind and became visual, he would free his hands to finger the little abacus-like device the Hefn used to calculate coordinates. Then he would set the coordinates mentally, by hurling each number into the pattern precisely where it needed to go.

There had never been a feeling quite like that absolute mastery, being so in tune with the shimmer pattern that the numbers snapped into their places without conscious effort, the way a lacrosse player snatches the ball from the air and hurls it into the net. I would never feel that mastery again. Desolation seized me, and again I looked away.

When I looked back, Liam had opened his eyes and stepped away from the transceiver. The window had opened; the silent recorder was running.

Anyone on the other side, where it was 2013, would have needed a sharp eye to spot the open window. It was April afternoon on both sides, and fine weather on both, and Liam and I were watching from positions where we could look through without being seen from the other side, if my father or my younger self did happen to glance our way.

Voices murmured inside the house, a pot banged on a stove top. Presently I heard what I'd been waiting for: a loud and piercingly sweet ripple of birdsong from a tree on the hillside behind the house. I got a grip on myself in time not to move or react when the screen door swung open with a squeak, and a girl came down the steps followed by a man: Young Pam at almost-thirteen, and Dad at thirty-six.

The bird's song had stopped my breath; the sight of these two figures, though I'd been expecting them, stopped my heart. I could feel Liam's head turn to look at me. I'd been just a little older than the girl in the window when he and I had met in Washington to begin our studies with Humphrey.

Her father passed the field glasses to Young Pam, who raised them to her eyes and scanned the treetops. Almost at once she smiled; she'd spotted the singer, a rose-breasted grosbeak, high in a tossing beech tree full of flowers. "Is the female this pretty?" she asked, and at the word *pretty* a stab of pity and loathing pierced me. That poor, homely kid with

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her potent binoculars! Her nose was much too big for her face, and her hair hung limp and mousy to her shoulders, but the thing that struck you was the huge mass of her breasts, like a single enormous tumor thrusting forward beneath her red-and-blue flannel shirt with the rolled-up sleeves.

How I'd loved that shirt — the boyish plaid, and the belief that it blurred my proportions! It hadn't of course; I could see now with terrible clarity how the breast mass strained at the buttons and the fabric between them. Really, the most that could be said for the shirt was, it wasn't a tight pink lambswool sweater.

"No," said Pam's father, answering her question. In the round frame of the window he stood there younger by a year or so — astonishing thought — than I was now myself. "The female's duller, like most of the other female finches. Looks kind of like a great big song sparrow, but a duller brown."

Young Pam held the glasses tight on the vivid bird. From my hiding place he was out of my line of sight, but I remembered perfectly how actively the grosbeak had moved through the foliage, eating flowers and pausing ever so often to proclaim his territory. He was so pretty! Black above and white below, with a triangular bib the color of raspberry sorbet beneath his chin, and a powerful finch's bill.

The rippling song poured forth again. Pam's father suddenly chuckled. "You know something," he said, "you and that bird up there are a whole lot alike — he's got a big strong beak, and he's got a pretty pink breast!" He laughed again, an innocent-sounding laugh, not cruel at all. "Never thought of that, did you! I expect he likes both of his better'n you like either of yours, too."

Again I felt Liam swivel his head toward me, and this time I glanced back. His face had filled with indignation; he understood, now, why I'd insisted on choosing this incident.

Young Pam seemed to falter —

— and precisely in that instant, the split second between the faltering and the hesitant lowering of the binoculars, a strange thing happened. Before my eyes, suspended in midair, flashed the image of a small book bound in red, with gilded page-edges, gold lettering on the cover, and a strap and gold lock; and with it came a whiff of feeling, gone almost too quickly to register.

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The image had vanished also. Pam lowered the glasses halfway and stood stock-still. Then, without a word, without glancing at her father, she handed him the binoculars and went quickly up the stairs into the house.

Shelby Pruitt stood looking after her, holding the field glasses awkwardly. Unbalanced as I'd been by what I'd just seen and felt, it still astonished me — I hadn't, of course, witnessed this part of the scene — to see that my young father's boyish, handsome face now wore a baffled, even a desolate look, a look that plainly said *I did it again, but I don't know what it was I did.*

Presently he stirred, lifted the field glasses again to scan the treetops; and I signaled Liam to close the window.

This he accomplished quickly and neatly. The lens that formed the window spiraled out from the edge, went opaque, and disappeared. Liam shut down the recorder, pulled the cartridge out, and flipped it to me; I fumbled it, squatted to retrieve it — and couldn't stand up again. "Bastard," he spat, truly furious. "That stupid bastard. That son of a bitch. I'm sorry I never blacked his eye for him when I had the chance." He scrubbed his hands through his hair, watching me. In a minute, when I hadn't responded or risen, he said, "So — did you get what all you needed?" And then, sharply, "Are you okay?"

As Liam said this, I sat down abruptly on the paving stones of the terrace, clutching my temples; a headache had come on like a crack of lightning, making my stomach heave.

He came and hunkered down beside me, saying again, "Are you okay?" I shook my head, truthfully; I felt ghastly. "No wonder. I'm pretty thrashed myself. God, this bradshaw stuff is playing with fire, I had no idea! I think what we just saw actually hit me harder than that realtime thing in the canoe, when he was going on about your swimsuit being too small — "

He stood and reached for my hand as he spoke, to help me up. He should have known better; he *did* know better. I batted him away and got up on my own, putting our eyes on the same level. "Right after he said that about me being like the grosbeak, did you see a little red book in the air?"

"See what?"

"A red book. In the air," I repeated, already sure of the answer.

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"In the *air*? No. What are you talking about? You mean — *you* did?"

Somebody jabbed an ice pick in my right temple and wiggled it around.

"Liam — " I grabbed his arm so desperately that I dragged him off balance, forcing him to take a step toward me " — I'm really sorry, I *really* am, but this wasn't it."

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "What wasn't what?"

"I made a mistake. This wasn't the right time."

"Right time for what? The *bradshaw*?" And when I nodded, "What are you talking about, it was a classic!" Then, realizing where I had to be leading, he started to get mad. "Hey, you don't *get* a second shot at a bradshaw, just because you rush into it without thinking about it carefully enough beforehand." He'd yanked his arm free.

"I would have made exactly the same mistake no matter how long I'd thought about it beforehand. I didn't know this wasn't the right time till I saw *this* time."

"That's not the Bureau's fault, Pam! You had one bradshaw coming, you were hell-bent on making it today, and you worked on me till I caved in and played along. But that's it. That's all you get. You're gonna have to settle for this one." He turned away and started to collapse the transceiver.

"I know all that," I said, trying to sound reasonable though I felt like hurling myself on the ground and screaming, "but this one won't get me where I need to go."

"Which is where?"

"I don't know. But now I know how to find out."

Exasperated, he turned to glower at me. "Something to do with the little red book in the air, I suppose?"

"It was a diary," I said, and heard my voice wobble. "A kid's diary, that old-fashioned type you were meant to keep in longhand. *My* diary. From when I was in the sixth grade. I threw it away." Liam glanced at me again without replying; I moved to stand beside him. "I've regretted it a million times, but I always thought I knew why I did it, till now."

"And the reason was?" he prompted obligingly, without breaking the rhythm of his work.

"I was reading this book, about a Navajo girl. She and her family lived in a hogan, where space was tight, I guess, and her mother was talking

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about her one day, and she said something like 'That one! She has more possessions!' and I thought, '*I* have too many possessions,' and started poking around my room to see what I could throw away."

"You were one weird kid."

"I don't remember whether I got rid of anything else, but I grabbed this diary that I'd gotten for Christmas and been writing in all year, and decided to pitch it. And then I wasn't sure. I remember saying to Mom that I was going to throw my diary away, and she said, 'Don't you think you might want to have it later on?' and I said, 'No, it won't be interesting till I start having dates.'"

Liam emitted a guffaw, but kept working.

"She could have stopped me," I said sadly, remembering that day. "If she'd said, 'Oh, don't do that, you'll be really glad to have that diary someday,' I would have kept it. At least, I'd've kept it that time...probably I'd've tossed it later on anyhow, though, because I think — I just realized this — I think throwing it away because of that Navajo-girl book is a cover story."

There was a brief silence while Liam finished compacting the transceiver into its case. He looked at his watch. Then he walked across the terrace and decorously sat down on one of the low chairs Orrin Hubbell, the original Hurt Hollow homesteader, had built so long ago. "Okay. Enlighten me. Why *do* you think you threw it away?"

This was the question it had only just occurred to me to ask myself, and I more or less made up my answer as I went along. "Maybe there was something in it that I needed to get rid of...something somebody didn't want me to tell anyone about. Maybe the person threatened me — I'd get sick and die if I told, or whatever. And I don't think it was Dad," I said, feeling sure of this at least. "He did what he did, and it was horrible, but I think — I'm just now starting to think — that somebody else might've gotten to me first."

"In that same way, you mean?"

"I don't know. It could have been some other way, I guess. Maybe I saw something I wasn't meant to see." As I spoke the words I knew they were untrue; I knew it wasn't the residue of any "other way," different from Dad's, that lay festering inside of me. Whatever the secret was, it was sexual and concerned me directly.

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Liam pondered this, then said carefully, "But even if that's true, I still can't see why you'd hallucinate the diary in the air right then. And I also don't see what's wrong with the Navajo-girl explanation. Why couldn't you have just taken a notion to throw your diary in the trash? People do throw stuff away, you know. Why does it have to be some heavy repressed-memory thing?"

But, in my mind, a conviction was strengthening moment by moment. "No, think about it. I'd pasted some stuff in the diary — a straw from an ice-cream soda bought for me by a boy I liked, named Rick, a locket a different kid named Rick gave me, that had his name engraved on it. You know, souvenirs. Well, before I threw it away I carefully peeled the straw and the locket off the pages, to keep. Why would I *do* that — keep the trinkets and toss the diary? It doesn't make sense! I was a kid who *kept* things — I kept my *fifth*-grade diary, such as it was, I kept a piece of paper with the signatures of all the kids in my *fourth*-grade class on it, I've got diaries and journals from the age of fourteen up to and including right now! Julie says mine is the most thoroughly documented life she's ever dealt with in her entire career as a therapist!"

"Okay, okay, calm down." Liam made pushing-down motions with his hands. "What became of all that souvenir stuff — where is it now?"

"I've still got it! All of it!" He repeated the gesture, more broadly this time. I sighed heavily and said "Okay. I'm calm."

"Good. Now. When you claim you've still got these mementos, do you mean you could go straight to where they are and put your hand on them?"

"Absolutely. That stuff is all in Salt Lake. The straw and locket are pasted in a scrapbook labeled 'Memorabilia,' which is on a shelf in my study."

"Hmm. What about the fifth-grade diary?"

"In a bookcase with all my other diaries and journals, above my desk. At the far left of the row. They're all in chronological order."

"I'm sure they are." He made a sour face, then fired one last test question: "What color is it?"

"The fifth-grade diary? Brown, dark brown. Smaller and skinnier than the others. Flexible cover."

"Pam," said Liam, "Humphrey might okay shooting a second

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bradshaw, since the virtual program for this one hasn't been written yet — for you he might — but I'm getting on that plane."

"Humphrey's hibernating, we'd have to ask Alfrey," I said, but things had stopped. We stared at each other. I was now supposed to back down, though both of us knew that, in Liam's place, I would already have groaningly accepted that the plane would be leaving without me. And suddenly this time I wasn't having it; the stakes were just too high. "I can't stop you," I said, now very calm indeed, "and I wouldn't exactly *blame* you, I know you've already disrupted your plans as a favor to me. But. If you'll do this for me too...well. Let's just say I'll never forget it."

Liam's expression gradually altered. Moving slowly, he got up from the chair, so our eyes were again on the same level across the terrace. "Meaning that if I don't do it, you'll never forget that, either." In my hypervigilant state, his pupils seemed to shrink into sharp, hard pinholes. "And the next time I call you up at midnight or the crack of dawn, to vent about my problems, you might not answer the phone."

"I'd say that's probably a pretty shrewd guess."

"So it's a crisis."

He wasn't asking, and I didn't reply. Both of us understood that nothing less than the fundamental balance — or working imbalance — of our relationship was on the line. If Liam went home to Eddie and his heavy weekend, and left me in this particular lurch, I realized that not only would I never forget it, I wouldn't be able to forgive him. And he had to decide now whether he wanted to deal with that, because we both knew that at this point in our long, difficult friendship, I had less to lose than he did.

6

A PERSON MAKES A BRADSHAW in order to revisit a traumatic event in her past *as her adult self,* equipped with the knowledge and experience she'd lacked as a child. The transceivers are windows, not doorways; you can't go through, and the Hefn wouldn't allow it if you could. When something goes wrong, and people in the past become aware of the time window, the Hefn wipe their memories; they don't particularly like to do

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that, but they do do it without exception (almost) if the need arises. They don't worry at all about changing the future, certain as they are that "Time is One, and fixed" — a maxim of our training as BTP techs. That is: if it's going to happen, it already has happened, from the foundation of the universe. Because Time is One, there are no alternate realities.

Anyway, with or without the participants being aware of the window, with or without mindwipe as a regrettable coda to the use of the transceiver, the recording is made. Besides the visual dimension of the event, shadow memories are also captured and recorded. The transceivers can't manipulate memory as well as specialized Hefn memory-control equipment does, but they can get something; how much varies with the individual and the context, and probably some other factors that aren't yet understood.

After that, the VR people use the recording to create a program in which the adult can stride in virtually upon the scene he or she lived through as a child, and *intervene*. He can beat his drunken, raving father to a pulp. He can slap his mother six ways from Sunday. He can pick up the little boy he was, age six and a half, sobbing and bleeding from the rectum, hold him in his arms and tell him, "I know, I know all about how awful you feel, how scared you are, how much it hurts, and I'm never going to let that bastard touch you again. It's all over now. You don't ever, ever have to be scared of him anymore. I'll keep you safe. From now on I'll be taking care of you."

The point is that while you can't make the promise good to the actual six-and-a-half-year-old sufferer back in the past, you can make it good to the six-and-a-half-year-old who still lives inside of the adult you, who's still traumatized by the awful things done to him and still feels powerless to protect himself.

A person needn't have been damaged nearly so brutally and globally, however, to find a bradshaw beneficial. People tell themselves that, compared to some of what they've heard about, the stuff their grandfather/neighbor/brother did to them is no big deal; but lesser abuse can also damage its victims much more profoundly than seems reasonable, as I have cause to know.

The fellow who gave his name to these virtual interventions was a late-twentieth-century self-help guru called John Bradshaw. All too often

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this character, a Texan, came through to casual viewers of his very popular media series as a cross between a sleazebag televangelist and a snake-oil salesman. A lot of educated people dismissed him in his day, without troubling to figure out what he was using this off-putting style to explain.

This was too bad. No original thinker himself, Bradshaw had an uncommon gift: he could synthesize the ideas of major psychological theorists, without distorting them, and communicate the practical side of these ideas to the sort of people who might never, otherwise, have access to psychotherapy.

On TV, and in his workshops, he used to have his audiences do an exercise. They were to choose a painful scene from their childhoods, one in which they had felt particularly helpless, miserable, betrayed, and — Bradshaw's special buzzword — shamed. They were to close their eyes and picture this scene vividly. Then they were to imagine walking in upon the scene as their adult selves, and doing whatever was necessary to protect the helpless child they used to be.

It wasn't unusual for workshop participants to burst into violent weeping as they followed their leader's instructions; and these interventions were "merely" imaginary. The effect of using the Hefn transceivers to capture actual events, making virtual interventions possible, was phenomenal. Without professional guidance (and even with it) the experience could be overwhelming. A more affordable bradshaw could certainly have become addictive to people who got off on that kind of emotional kick.

The actual event captured when the bradshaw was made sometimes proved to be very different from the way the event had been remembered. But nailing the exact cause of misery usually mattered much less than assuring a miserable child that she would never again be alone, defenseless and terrified, in the face of torment.

7

On the morning following the scene with Liam, I woke when a voice spoke inside my head. "Pinny's Hefn," said the voice.

I was used to waking up with the impression that someone had just spoken aloud, typically a name or an innocuous word or phrase —

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"Carrots," "That's the target!" So in itself this was nothing remarkable.

This voice sounded no different; the difference was in what it said. In retrospect it struck me as a kind of aural equivalent of the diary-in-the-air hallucination.

Pinny's Hefn was the title of a "novel" I'd written the summer I turned fourteen. The novel dealt with the doings of a peculiar girl — Pinny, short for large-nosed Pinocchio — who much resembled me, and a Hefn named Comfrey; I'd been extremely taken with the only Hefn I'd met in the flesh — my mentor-to-be, Humphrey, at my Bureau interview — and modeled Comfrey upon him as best I could. My novel was set, and mostly written, at Hurt Hollow. I hadn't paged through the manuscript in years, though (naturally) I knew exactly where it was: in a blue folder, in a cardboard box in a Salt Lake City storage closet, among the Memorabilia (or possibly the Juvenilia): 164 pages scribbled in longhand on blue-lined paper with three holes punched down the side.

What I thought about after the voice startled me awake, while my mind was clearing, was the looseleaf binder I'd kept those pages in while I was writing and accumulating them. I could visualize it perfectly, that binder: a ratty old thing even then, made of fake brown alligator skin, with a zipper around three sides. I'd liked that zipper; it made the story feel secure. The binder had been Dad's; he'd passed it on to me when I started working on *Pinny's Hefn*, at the beginning of my last whole summer at home....

No. He'd given it to me earlier, maybe a year before that, because I'd already possessed it when I needed a folder to put certain secret papers into for safekeeping. What secret papers? I could barely remember; and yet — like the image of the red diary — the thought of them carried a powerful emotional charge.

Concentrate now, I told myself: what papers? Some news clippings about horses and horse races — I'd gone through a racehorse stage, during which I'd cut things out of the paper. There was one particular Kentucky Derby when I knew who all the horses and jockeys were and who was favored to win by how much. That had been the fifth grade. I was ten. What in the world could have seemed so secret about race horses and horse races? I'd always supposed, when I remembered this at all, that I must have made a secret of it just to *have* a secret; but it struck me now as peculiar.

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What else? I lay perfectly still and cudgeled my wits, but all that came to mind were some sheets of computer paper on which a code had been worked out by me and a couple of guys named Charlie and Steve, my best friends since earliest childhood, no offense to the two Ricks. We'd made up this code, with a symbol for each letter of the alphabet, so we could write encrypted notes to each other in school and leave them under the pedal of the drinking fountain out in the hallway. We did that in Mr. Hopper's class...so that had been the sixth grade, when we were eleven.

Lying there in bed, it drifted back to me. I'd kept those clippings and the code key in the alligator-skin notebook, tucked into the pockets inside the flaps. When I'd needed the notebook for *Pinny's Hefn* I'd transferred the other papers to a big manila envelope, and kept the envelope in my bottom bureau drawer, under the T-shirts. Then at the end of that summer, before leaving for Washington to start my apprenticeship at the Bureau of Temporal Physics, I'd put the completed novel in the blue folder and the clippings and code keys back in the notebook, and put both into a larger box that I stashed up in the attic in my parents' house in Scofield — this house. My room was to be the guest room while I was away; I didn't want people poking through my stuff.

I recall debating whether to keep the notebook at all; the prospect of the new life before me had made me feel like making a clean break with the past, or certain parts of it. But I did keep it, at some level perhaps remembering the red diary and beginning to understand the mothhole its loss had gnawed in the fabric of my life.

Later, when Liam and I had graduated from the BTP and were preparing to move out to Bureau Headquarters, relocating that year in Santa Barbara, I made a farewell trip home. On that visit I boxed up all my books and belongings, acting on a vague wish to get them out of my parents' house and safely into my own keeping. In the course of this packing I crawled up a ladder through the trap door that was our access to the attic. Sitting up there cross-legged under a naked light bulb, I went through all my stored cartons and divided everything into two piles: *take* and *chuck*. I remembered lifting out the alligator binder and holding it in my hands. I remembered dragging the zipper pull around the edge, with a sound like heavy cloth ripping, and leafing through the yellowed paper scraps within.

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Several times over the years I'd winnowed down my stash of "possessions" in the attic. Each time I'd considered throwing out the papers in that notebook, but had always held back. This time I did it. The odd thing was that I *knew*, as I sat there in the dust making the decision, that someday I'd be sorry.

This precedent suggested that even if my mother had persuaded me to save the red diary when I appealed to her, another day it would probably have gone the way of the brown binder.

What the Sam Hill *was* it about that year, my sixth-grade year, that I couldn't afford to remember or keep any evidence of? The Hefn had returned that October; but that wasn't it; I'd felt only intense interest, untinged with fear, when I heard they'd come back to stay. I'd loved my teacher, my school, playing Tarzan on the wooded bluff above the river with Steve and Charlie; had anyone asked, I would readily have said that that year, my last of real childhood, was the happiest of all.

Eleven years old. No period, not quite yet. No boobs yet to speak of, though I'd received my first training bras already, two of them in soft cotton, a gift from Grandma for my birthday just before the start of the new school year. Obviously, Mom had been discussing my "development" with her mother-in-law. Not with me, though; the first I knew that there were going to be bras in my immediate future was when I opened the package, with both my parents looking on, and there they were.

Could it be that I'd resented Grandma for forcing those bras upon me, and with them the issue of the terrible changes about to possess my body? So much so that afterward I never wanted to go over to her house when we went down to Louisville? No, because I could remember sitting in a rocking chair in Granny's front room one evening, engrossed in a Tarzan book, and Mom touching my shoulder and saying, "Time to go to Grandma's now. You're sleeping over there tonight, better get your pajamas and some clean underwear." I remembered clearly how, at these words, my heart sank like a stone; and I couldn't have been more than eight or nine at the time — much younger than eleven.

Old enough, however, to understand that I wasn't to object or whine or say I didn't want to sleep over, didn't want to go over there at all. I wasn't supposed to say how I felt about things, unless the feelings were the sort Mom wanted to know about, and I didn't have to be told she didn't want

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to know about these. Or hear about them, rather, because she did know. She just didn't care. She cared about what I did, not how I felt about it.

Feeling agitated, I rolled out of bed, pulled on my robe, and padded down the hall. Liam's door was open, his bed stripped, his neatly repacked suitcase open on the mattress pad. The time transceiver, in its case, stood on the floor by the door. I trotted down the stairs and found my reluctant guest drinking hot cider at the kitchen table. He was dressed for overland travel, not in uniform but in a loose light tunic and trousers, and his scalp gleamed through his neatly combed hair. "Hi," I said. "Are you speaking to me today?"

"No," he said. "There's a Louisville packet at two-sixteen from Scofield Beach, and a train tonight that will get me to California Wednesday afternoon. I put my sheets in the washer, which isn't working very well, by the way, you'd better have it serviced. I've ordered a taxi for one-thirty. Eat something and let's get it over with."

His last hope for getting off the hook I'd hung him on had been dashed yesterday when his request for permission to re-record my bradshaw had been instantly approved by the Hefn Alfrey, already back in California and still acting for the sleeping Humphrey. After that he'd had to choose for himself. I glanced up at the clock: 8:35. "I can eat later. I'm ready now if you are."

"Fine." He scraped back his chair and pushed past me, taking the stairs two at a time. I trailed him, thinking. Diary or alligator binder? If I couldn't have both, which was more important?

Liam grabbed the transceiver as he passed the door and said over his shoulder, without looking back, "Where do I set up?"

Both were important, but the diary mattered more. "In the doorway of my room, I guess."

He snapped around. "Don't guess, all right? Decide and tell me where."

"Oh, knock it off," I said mildly. "The doorway of my room, then, definitely." He was very angry, but I didn't mind so much about that; what mattered was, he was here, and that meant the two of us were fundamentally okay, or would be again in time.

So, walking stiffly to be sure I understood how mad he was, Liam carried the transceiver down the hall and set it up in my doorway. From

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that position the lens could take in the whole small room. Though furnished sparsely enough now, it seemed crammed by contrast with the time we were about to revisit. My parents hadn't figured that a child's room needed furniture; my room, painted pale blue, had held a bed and a bureau, and nothing else: no desk, no chair, and — astonishing in a librarian's household — no bookshelves. Mom could never see the point of kids owning books. Once you'd read a book, why keep it around, when you could check books out of the library for free, then exchange those for others? If I'd appealed to Dad, he would probably — no, certainly — have intervened, but I don't think it ever occurred to me to ask for his help.

My few books had been arranged neatly on the floor, along the baseboard of one wall, an arrangement I'd accepted without question; the first bookcase I ever had the use of was the one in my room at the BTP, in Washington. There was a ceiling light and a bedlight, but no lamp. I used to do my homework on the dining-room table.

I couldn't remember where I'd kept the diary — in the row of books on the floor, in a bureau drawer, maybe under my bed? — but I did remember sitting on the bed to write in it. When the window opened, we would at the very least see that.

To hide the transceiver was going to be impossible; unless she happened to be very engrossed in her writing, the eleven-year-old kid I used to be would have to be mindwiped, as Liam pointed out while setting up. The possibility didn't worry me at all. Time is One. (Lost gift or no, I probably believed this Hefn doctrine more deeply than Liam did.) If I'd been wiped in 2010 or 2011, that experience had been part of my life ever since. If I hadn't, then it hadn't been. Either way, nothing would change.

"Ready," he said finally. "Dates."

"Summer 2011." The sixth grade would be over and the diary account of it completed. He was to scroll for prepubescent Pam sitting on her bed, reading or writing in a book. Liam nodded once, slipped his hands into the dimples, and began.

Our first problem was an embarrassment of riches. Prepubescent Pam read in bed every night of her life; that was the point of the bedlight hooked over the headboard. A bewildering jumble of girl, bed, and book, not images but ghostly implications, replaced one another in the shimmer pattern. I couldn't look; the visual mayhem hurt not just the eyes but the

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brain of an observer not attuned to the transceiver. Even Liam, in perfect attunement, moaned a little with the mental effort of searching a haystack for one particular type of golden stalk.

So I sensed rather than saw him arch back out of the field. I looked, and the lens had dilated. A skinny, scabby, sun-tanned girl perched on the edge of the bed, on the side near the window so her back was mostly toward the door, writing in a red book with a pencil. She was dressed in yellow shorts and a plaid halter. Her right foot in a blue canvas shoe was tucked beneath her, and her long bare leg, bent double, stuck out over the foot of the bed like the hind leg of a grasshopper. Limp brown hair fell forward, screening her face. It was afternoon of a bright, breezy, hot-looking day; sunlight streamed in through the open window and the curtains were blowing. The bed was made up with my favorite of several old quilts made by Granny and her spinster sisters, a pattern of silhouetted Dutch girls in bonnets and wooden shoes.

I looked upon this scene and felt — heartache. Intense longing. Nostalgia that without much pressure could approach hysteria: joy impossible ever to know again, shimmering just beyond the lens in the sunny room. And something else, a sinister potential, inescapable and dire but for the moment far away.

At the sight of myself — of everything I'd been just then, just there, extreme two ways at once — my ears rang and the edges of my field of vision went black. But Liam, watching me react, had started the recorder.

I leaned against the door jamb and lowered my head till the ringing stopped and my vision cleared. When I looked again, the girl had closed the red book and turned sideways on the bed. Her face and body in profile — fleshy nose that nobody'd yet realized had once been broken and hadn't healed correctly, little tethered breasts pointing beneath the halter — made my throat ache. She clicked the diary's strap into its lock and held the book in both her hands, a moment of utter privacy, before reaching under the bed to pull out a scuffed navy-and-white saddle oxford, a school shoe. She shook something out — a key chain, that fell into her hand with a little clink. And I knew, abruptly, what was on that key chain: a four-leaf clover embedded in plastic, and a tiny gold key.

The girl pushed the key into the keyhole with two long fingers and turned it, locking the diary. She dropped the key chain into the toe of the

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shoe and stuck the shoe back under the bed. Then she started to stand up — and I signaled Liam to pull us out. I didn't need to see her hiding place, not at the cost of having to wipe her. I had what I needed.

8

A MONTH LATER found me sitting, hunched forward, in a private cubicle of a VR parlor in Salt Lake City, my bradshaw's virtual program disc in my lap. My therapy session by videophone was almost over. My therapist, Julie Hightower, was seated in a big upholstered chair in her Washington DC office — actually a room in her own house in Georgetown — looking as calm and composed as I felt anything but. We'd had four weeks now to prep for this, but my shock at seeing the child I used to be, in that room full of extreme and contradictory feelings, hadn't entirely faded, and we'd spent this session talking about the pros and cons of proceeding vs. further preparation.

"I do think, if you want to run the program now, you'll handle it all right," Julie summed up thoughtfully, "but I think you should be careful, and be ready to jump out and regroup if you start to feel the waters closing over your head. Remember, you can always have another go tomorrow, or next month, or whenever."

One of the things I liked most about Julie was the judicious, respectful way she talked to her patients. To me, anyway. She was Liam's therapist too — he'd referred me to her — but we'd stopped exchanging notes about Julie years ago; I had no idea how, or even whether, she talked to him these days. I grinned weakly and said, "I'll remember."

I'd asked if she wanted to monitor, but Julie felt the value of the experience — especially this first time — might be compromised if my concentration on it were less than total. On the other hand, given the circumstances, extra contact time was okay by Julie. "*Call me* if you need to," she urged.

"You don't have to twist my arm," I told her.

We confirmed the next week's appointment, said our goodbyes, and hung up. For fear of charging away without it later, I took the time to disassemble and stow the phone in my backpack. Then, before I

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could lose my nerve, I slipped the disc out of its sleeve and fed it into the slot.

I didn't frequent VR parlors; unfamiliarity and terror made me clumsy, but the boots, gloves, and helmet were designed to be user-friendly. Finally the light on the console glowed green, and a speaker said, "When you are ready, initiate the program by saying the word 'Begin.'"

Feeling as if I were about to be hurled from a plane at my own request, I did as instructed —

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— and was standing in the doorway of my room, the no-frills 2011 version, ten feet from Prepubescent Pam in what appeared to be the living flesh.

Awkward with the gear, I took a couple of jerky steps into the room and sat down heavily on the near side of the bed, opposite the girl absorbed in her diary. I sat right on the Dutch girl quilt and felt its nubbly texture under my hand.

She looked up, startled, snapping the book shut and clicking the lock; and at this first full-face view of her — synthesized from her profile with the aid of a couple of old holos — I almost stopped the program.

But I didn't, I let it run. I let her scramble up, back away against the wall, say her first alarmed words to me, which were, not surprisingly, "What're you doing here? Who are you, anyway?"

They'd worked with Liam's earlier recording made at Hurt Hollow, tuning the voice to be slightly younger. This kid sounded exactly like an eleven-year-old who was a little bit scared. I was impressed. I was also utterly nonplused.

But, again, I stayed with it. I answered her question the way I'd planned to, when and if she asked it: "I'm you. I'm the person you're going to be when you grow up."

I'd been apprehensive about how she would react, but all she did was look surprised and say "Oh." No real child would have settled for such an answer; by accepting it, Little Pam identified herself as virtual, and let me recover some sense of control.

But then she started giving me the once-over, and I saw her take in the

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size of my chest, and her eyes widen in dismay. "Nunh-*unh*, *I'm* not gonna be that big, no way! If I ever get as big as you I'm getting reduced!"

"I *am* getting reduced," I said — and was astonished to realize I meant it, that I couldn't in fact imagine why I'd tolerated the despised breasts for so long. With plastic surgery booming worldwide, and an enormous aging clientele to bring prices down, I might have done something long ago about myself. Why hadn't I? (Why hadn't I refused to wear the goddam pink lambswool sweater?)

And that was all it took, a blunt remark from the kid, to shatter a twenty-five-year mindset? If running a bradshaw could do that to you in the first five minutes...thoroughly unnerved, I stared at Little Pam as I might have stared at a wizard.

She glared back, suspicious of me now. "*I'm* not waiting till I get as old as you are. What are you doing here, anyway?" She sounded more accusing now than scared.

I had the answer to that one ready too. "I came to see the diary."

Pam glanced down at the little book, still in her hand. "This?" I nodded. "What for?"

"Because I can't remember what's in it, and I'm pretty sure I wrote something important in there."

"But why do you need mine? Can't you just look up whatever it is yourself?"

"No," I said. "I haven't got it anymore."

Coloring, Pam clutched the little book against her flat stomach. "I'm keeping this diary forever!" She shook her head so hard her straight brown hair whipped about her face. "I don't believe you. You're lying. *You're* not me."

Getting into the question of why I didn't have the diary anymore was the last thing I wanted. It was all going wrong. "Pause," I croaked desperately, and the figure of Pam froze in place, indignant expression and all, between the bed and the wall. I closed my eyes, realized I was sweating, thirsty, and exhausted, that the back of my head was pounding, and that I was going to have to stop pretty soon.

Arguing with the kid was no good, and I knew instinctively that to wrestle the diary from her by force wouldn't work. She would have to show it to me of her own free will, and for that to happen I had to convince

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her that I was who I said I was. I took some deep breaths, telling myself to calm down. After a minute I opened my eyes and said "Resume," and Pam came back to life, glowering at me.

"Look." I leaned across the bed and placed my right hand flat, fingers splayed, on the Dutch girl quilt. "Put your hand there, next to mine."

She did look, then looked at me, then back at my hand. Then, reluctantly, she gave a kind of capitulating snort. "I don't have to. They're the same."

"Do it anyway, okay?"

Pam hesitated, but sat back down on her side of the bed, laid the diary on the quilt, and spread out her left hand, long palm and spidery fingers, nails tapering instead of wide and blunt the way she wished, beside my right one. The turquoise thunderbird ring a house cleaner had stolen out of my closet, years ago, was around her left little finger. Our two hands were nearly of a size, though my skin was wrinkled and veiny and her nails were dirty.

"Convinced?"

"They're like a pair of gloves, only one's been worn a lot and one's practically new." Little Pam withdrew the hand and hid her bony fingers in a fist. "Becky said in church last week that having big hands is good, because you can climb trees better. And I said, 'But yours aren't big for a woman. Mine are big for a *woman*.'"

I'd forgotten that exchange till she reminded me. "Can't get hands reduced, hon, not even in my time." I might have added that I *had* had a nose job; but Pam would be thirteen before she realized there was anything wrong with her nose, and besides, I could hardly claim credit. The rhinoplasty had been done over my violent objections. Dad was the one who *really* hadn't liked my nose.

Now Pam flashed her eyes at me. "I'm giving you one more test, okay? If you can recite 'Lone Dog' all the way through without making any mistakes, I'll believe you're me."

Smart move. I rattled off "Lone Dog," a poem from our sixth-grade reader, without hesitation or error, and added, "Want me to quote 'Now Chil the Kite brings home the night'?" It was a chapter heading from *The Jungle Books* — the very first Kipling poem I'd ever learned by heart.

"Never mind," she said, relaxed and grinning now, "you win. You

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said it exactly like I do: 'Oh, mine is still the *lone* trail, the *hard* trail, the *best!*'"

"I hung onto that, anyway." She nodded. "So how about it: can I see the diary?"

She looked down at it, shiny red, and up at me, and then she picked it up and reached it over to me across the bed.

I could barely breathe. I held the little book, feeling her eyes on me, then clumsily pushed up the button that released the lock and opened it to the middle, June, 2011.

The diary had a lumpy feel because of the objects — straw, locket, some folded notes — pasted into it. I flipped slowly backward, then forward. May, April. July, August. All the pages were blank.

10

Julie was sympathetic, but not at all discouraged. "I guess we should have known it wouldn't be that simple," she said, after we talked about how I'd felt when I discovered the diary had no writing at all in it (crushed), and how I felt now (wildly agitated). "Look at what you accomplished, though. You figured out a way to establish your authenticity, and you won her trust. Not bad at all for a first session. Also, I think it's significant that the diary wasn't locked."

It hadn't been locked yet when Liam started shooting, but I didn't go into that. "Not literally it wasn't, but so what? I was locked out anyway." Despite Julie's efforts, this still felt fairly shattering. "That kid, God, she really threw me. I didn't expect her to be such a tough customer. I can't imagine myself, at her age, standing up to a total stranger like that, scolding her for not having gotten a *breast* reduction!"

Julie grinned. "That's not my impression." Professional ethics forbade her to tell me that Liam had given her a different picture of me as a child, the jerk, but I was pretty sure that's what she meant.

"So where do I go from here? Any ideas?" I felt fresh out of them myself. The whole experience of the bradshaw, so far, had been one rude, exhausting shock after another.

"It would probably be more useful if the ideas came from you," Julie predictably said. "*You* destroyed the evidence — all of it, the diary and the

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papers in the alligator binder. Undoubtedly you had an excellent reason at the time, but it would seem that your unconscious will let you *see* what you wrote in the diary only after being reassured that it's safe to reveal the secret now. How to reassure it is the challenge."

"I see that," I told her, "but isn't there more than one way to skin this cat? What about trying hypnotherapy again? It's been, what, four years? Lots of water under the bridge since then."

Julie frowned. "Hypnotherapy is certainly still an option, and, as you say, a lot has happened since we tried it before, but I don't think I'd recommend it right now. Your history of resistance isn't the only reason I say this; I've also found that it's usually better to stick to one approach until you've given that approach a fair chance to work. If you should decide at a later time to abandon the bradshaw, temporarily or permanently, we can talk about this again, but for now...."

"I was considering abandoning it, actually."

"Well," said Julie, and I knew at once which side of *that* line she was about to come down on, "of course that's your decision, but you've been given a rare means of delving into your unconscious mind — something many of my patients would love to be able to make use of — and I hope you won't throw that opportunity away without giving it very careful consideration."

I said wryly, "I suppose you had no ulterior motive when you said you hoped I wouldn't 'throw it away.'"

Julie grinned broadly. "Of course not."

She waited, looking expectant, while I cudgeled my wits, but my mind was as blank as the pages of the diary had seemed. Finally I said, "Look, I know I was no great shakes as a hypnotic subject, but I'm not sure I'm cut out to be that much better as a bradshaw operator. Couldn't you at least suggest a strategy for coming up with some ideas?"

She chuckled. "Come on, Pam, you don't need me to tell you how to do that. I wonder if, by trying to get me to tell you something you already know, you aren't actually saying you feel a need for help and support."

Actually, of course, she didn't "wonder" this at all. And she was right, I did know perfectly well what to do, really: keep track of my dreams, focus my meditations, write down every single detail I *could* recall about that year.

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It all added up to a lot of work, and I had plenty to do without any extras. Baby Ban riots had recently torn through the capital cities of Malawi and Burundi, and were now popping up all over South America. The Pope and the Head of the U.N. had requested a joint audience with a Hefn delegation. While the alien-human coalition, dedicated to saving both Earth and her people, continued to work at a frantic pace on the population problem, a majority of the Hefn now favored abandoning humanity entirely.

Alfrey and Godfrey, both overdue for the long sleep, were taking anti-hibernation drugs, which made their hair fall out in patches. They desperately needed Humphrey, but Humphrey would be sleeping for seven or eight more weeks at least, and they didn't dare wake him prematurely — too dangerous. Under such circumstances, even a bench warmer like myself was as busy as a one-armed paperhanger, processing computer data generated by the techs running time transceivers. It was almost impossible to have a personal life at all, let alone a personal crisis or epiphany.

Julie was also right that I was asking for support; but till she said so I hadn't realized it, and was embarrassed. *Little* Pam never asked anybody for help. I glanced at the clock to see if the session weren't just about over.

"Of course," Julie went on when I didn't reply, "I have, and do, and will continue to support you in every way I can. I do believe that you can use this bradshaw to find out some things you need to know about your past, in order to get on more constructively with your life. But whether or not you proceed with this, or proceed with it now, is entirely up to you. It was pure coincidence that the convention you attended was on your home turf. If you don't want to work on the bradshaw just at present, that probably means you're not ready, and that I was mistaken to think you were."

I shook my head. "No, no, you weren't mistaken. I *am* ready. And I'll do it, the dream log and free-associative writing, the whole nine yards, but I still don't *want* to, I wish I didn't have to — you might have been mistaken about that much anyway."

Julie smiled. "One day we must have a discussion about the meaning of the word *want*. We're out of time for today, though, so I'll limit myself to reminding you of one more thing you already know: that every word you put down in that little book *is* still in your memory somewhere."

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"I do know that. Thanks."

Julie stood up and smiled. "Good luck on your next trip through the time portal."

11

THE NEXT WEEK was a blur of conference calls and computer modeling, but I used whatever odd scraps of time I could find to prepare myself for my next encounter with the girl in the bare bedroom. To that end I got out the brown 2010 diary and browsed through the entries for the summer before the beginning of sixth grade:

July 31. Today I got my cast off my arm. The muscle is little. dr. ogden said it wont hurt too long. We star gazed tonite. Pam [I'd broken my arm falling out of a tree]

August 1. Nothing happened today. Hank [Hank? Trying out boys' names...]

August 2. My arm is better I went swimming. We star gazed tonight. Sam

August 3. Last nite I slept downstairs I saw a viddy, It scared me. we went to Madison to get a water melin. Sam

August 4. Nothing happened today. Pam

August 5. today was boring nothing happened [not even token punctuation, apparently]

August 6. Tonight I saw Dungeon of mutations. Hope I don't have nightmares, but bet I will. I did calculus with Doug [Doug Emmi, my math tutor].

August 7. Dear Diary, today was boreing we had hamburgers for supper Harry

Apart from scaring myself with horror viddies, most of August did sound fairly "boreing." I stargazed; Dad was teaching me to recognize the easy constellations and locate bright stars like Arcturus and Vega. I went swimming at the quarry, played Tarzan with Charlie and Steve (before the broken arm), played "Mumbley Peg" with Becky. Nothing the least bit remarkable there. I skipped ahead:

August 24. Today I packed for Louisville [I was going down to

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Granny's — Granny was my "good" grandmother, Mom's mother — for a week's visit, to end with my eleventh birthday on September 1]

August 26 Dear D today I had fun sewing and playing dolls with Granny. [A dexterous child, I could stitch a neat seam from the age of five or six; and while I didn't "play dolls" in the usual way — a girly-girl thing to be despised and scorned — I loved making little pants and jackets for my two diminutive plastic boy dolls with patient Granny, the only adult who ever played with me. And now the diary reported again and again throughout the week: *Today I had fun.*]

August 29. today I went to town with Granny & saw Churchill downs. I got 2 books, the son of Tarzan & Woof howe hob. Pamfrey [Woof Howe Hob was a book about the stranded Hefn mummified in a Yorkshire peat bog. Obviously, two months before their return, I was already interested in the Hefn, to the point of appropriating their -frey suffix into my own name games. Nobody yet knew that one of the Hefn actually was called Pomfrey.]

August 31. Dear D today Mom came. I missed her a lot. [Dad definitely came too. Nothing about missing him.]

September 1. Today Is my birthday. I am eleven years old. I got a boomclox, a tunic, a blue bedlamp [!], *swimming goggles, and I blew out all the candles & wished for an elec. canoe. Pam* [And in very faint pencil, along the margin of the bound edge: *MOM & DAD WOULDN'T SING HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME THEY MADE ME CRY BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW IT.*]

Oh God. Now I remembered that birthday.

My parents' strange refusal to sing wasn't the worst of it. Granny had bought me a boomclox we'd seen in a shop window on our ritual trip to town, unaware that Mom had also planned to give me one. When we got home to Scofield Mom showed me *her* boomclox — which I instantly recognized as superior to Granny's in every way, smaller, cuter, pricier — but told me she was taking it back to the store, I couldn't have it; Granny's clunky boomclox was the one I had to keep. It occurred to neither of us — certainly not to me — that the redundant gift might have been exchanged for something else.

I could visualize Mom's "present" in perfect detail. The "clock" part of it was Swiss. Every hour on the hour a bugle blew and a little door flew

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open, releasing three adorable clockwork thoroughbreds, each with a tiny, crop-wielding jockey on its back. Horses and jockeys raced each other around a semicircle to another door that closed behind them. The programing was randomized; you never knew which horse would win. I was less besotted with the Japanese "boombox" part, but no doubt its sound quality was excellent.

I pleaded and begged to keep that boomclox, but to no avail: back to the store it went. Needless to say, my pleasure in Granny's gift was a casualty of all this fuss.

The blank space in the list? My best guess: it was a place-holder for the unmentionable bras from Grandma.

September 2. Mom sang to me late last night, and dad sang to me this morning. Now all I want is the boomclox mom got for me. Pam

I was starting to feel sick. I shut the little book and put it away.

12

Homely, skinny Little Pam sat on the double bed covered with the Dutch girl quilt, one long leg bent double, a foot tucked beneath her, scribbling in the red diary with a yellow pencil. To the left of the door, on top of her bureau, squatted the boomclox, displaying the time and date in violet numbers. A little rack of CD's squatted beside it, but no music was playing. The room was full of sunshine.

"Hi," I said, and sat down on the bed.

Pam looked up, then dropped her pencil and snapped the diary shut. "You came back."

"Mm-hm. How are you? How do you feel?"

"Fine. Why'd you come back? What were you so upset about?"

"I couldn't read your diary. Sorry I rushed off like that. I want to try again, but first I want to talk to you about your boomclox."

Pam's eyes turned toward it, then back to me. "What about it?"

"Granny gave you that last summer for your birthday." She nodded. "But Mom got you one too, and she wouldn't let you keep it."

"No. She took it back."

"Why'd she do that?"

Pam shrugged. "Granny bought me that one 'cause I asked her to

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...well, not exactly asked her to. We were walking along and I saw it in the window and told her I liked it, and she said did I want her to get it for my birthday and I said yes. But Mom, see, she'd already gotten me one, and I couldn't have two boomcloxes, so I had to keep this one."

"So you're saying it's kind of your fault that you couldn't have the one Mom got for you."

"Well....yeah. Because if I hadn't asked for *that* one, I could have kept the cool one with the racehorses."

"Honey," I said, leaning toward her, "it wasn't your fault at all. *Not at all.* It wasn't anybody's fault, but Mom was mad at Granny for messing up her plan and she needed to blame somebody. And she couldn't punish Granny, so she punished you."

"You mean — by taking the nice boomclox back to the store?"

"I really mean, by showing it to you at all. You were happy with Granny's till you saw Mom's, right? There was no reason at all to show it to you if she meant to take it back. She just did it to make you feel bad, to get even. It was mean, and you hadn't done anything to deserve it. I want you to understand that. I didn't understand it till I was a lot older than you are now, and I wish I had."

The girl stared at me, eyes filling with comprehension, then suddenly with shiny tears. "It wasn't fair," she said wonderingly.

"No, it sure as heck *wasn't* fair. And I'll tell you something else: she won't ever pull anything like that on you again, because I'm here now, and I won't let her. "

"You won't?"

"I won't. I promise."

Pam rubbed the back of her bare wrist under her nose, snuffling a little. Then, without being asked, she handed the diary across the Dutch girls to me.

I held it prayerfully for a moment. Then I let it fall open and looked down.

13

"It was all in *code,*" I reported to Julie, "that code Charlie and Steve and I made up, so we could write secret notes to each other in school. I

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looked down at the page — dreading that it would be blank again — and there were these lines of spirals and stars and triangles and pitchforks, in pencil."

"Did you keep the diary in code?"

"No, no, in ordinary cursive English! I might've tried the code for a page or two, but it would have been too slow for everyday, even if I'd memorized it, which as far as I can recall I never did."

"Well, that's fascinating. That's really fascinating," said Julie. Plainly, she meant it. The ways and means of bradshaws still hadn't been studied much — too few cases — so this was all psychological terra semicognita. I could practically see the preliminary outline for the article she was planning to write coming together behind her eyes.

"So after I checked to make sure the whole diary was in code, I asked the kid if she would let me borrow the code key."

"In the alligator notebook!"

"Right."

"And?"

"She said, 'I can't. It's out in the hall closet, and I have to stay in my room.' And I realized that by setting up the transceiver in the doorway, we'd trapped her in there. Nothing outside that one room was available to either of us. Well, then I had a kind of desperate brainwave; I asked her if she could call Charlie or Steve on her phone and ask them to bring a copy of the key over and pitch it up to her through the window."

Julie sat back in her chair. "I take it that didn't work."

"How'd you guess? She did call them up, but both their phones just rang and rang. *They* weren't available. I don't know why not, actually; it seems to me that she ought to have been able to reach outside the room in that way."

Julie nodded. "Maybe there are factors embedded in the whole bradshaw phenomenon that keep you from proceeding in a way your own unconscious doesn't endorse. But it's like the shadow-memory phenomenon; we don't yet know why a virtual person can remember the things she remembers, but *only* those things, or why someone running the virtual program — like you — can accomplish some things and not others." She leaned forward, toward the camera. "So: how did you feel when Charlie and Steve didn't answer their phones?"

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"Defeated for this round, but not as discouraged as before. But I realized the phone idea was a bust, so I shut the program down till I could hash things over with you."

Julie smiled cheerfully. "Well! It's encouraging, isn't it? First you get blank pages, then you get a code you once made up yourself. That feels like progress to me."

"To me too. It feels like things are moving forward, and that when I work out the right approach I'll get where I need to go."

Julie nodded. "I agree. Shall we start on the hashing-over, then? What was different about this run? What did you do this time, that you didn't do the first time?"

I could tell her that, all right. I'd done what Bradshaw himself had recommended: in his own gooey phrase, I had "championed my inner child." I'd told the kid that our mother had punished her for something that wasn't her fault, and that showing her the pretty clock was mean.

I'd also promised her that I would never allow this to happen again. In life it had happened many times over, and none of those meannesses could be undone. Still, to this eleven-year-old version of myself, I had made a commitment of protection. According to Bradshaw, this should do both of us good.

The funny thing was, I'd said what I'd said spontaneously. I hadn't been thinking about "championing" exercises. Fresh from reading the earlier diary, I'd glared at that charmless boomclox on the bureau and told the kid what I'd needed to hear myself — when I was Pam/Sam/Hank — but never had.

14

Dream Log, 5/17/37. I live in a duplex. There are bears next door. The Fire Dept. comes to take them away, but the next day two cubs appear in the hallway of the half where I live, and rush into my room. I shove them out, but now the mother bear is in the hall. She sticks her paw in the doorway, tries to get in. The hasp on the door is frail and she bends the plate with her paw; I have to hold it shut and bend it back with my thumb so the bolt will engage.

Several times I discover that the door's slightly open. When I close it

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she attacks, but not when it's ajar. Once the mother bear actually comes into my room, standing upright, and I escort her out. We both maintain our dignity during this scene — no unseemly panic or ferocity. I'm able to control her in her presence, but when the door's between us she becomes savage.

There's an antique table phone in the hallway, white, on a tall stalk. I rush out and grab it, run the cord under the door, slam the door. The bear attacks. I call the Fire Dept. and they come right away. The bears are hiding. One of the firemen wants me to sit beside him on a bed and read a book of stories for a purpose now unclear, except that it had something to do with catching the bears.

Dream Log, 5/17/37. I'm weeding the flower beds of some house I live in with Mom, and accidentally break several tulip stalks. Mom yells angrily, but I reply that it doesn't matter because we'll never sell this house or move out of it. Will we? She acts furtive and moves away. I run after her, shouting, screaming even, furious that she walked away like that without answering me. She walks faster, then turns and brandishes a shiny black handgun! I wrestle it away from her immediately — no question that I can dominate her in this literal, physical sense — but I understand that she's sold the house, my home, right out from under me.

I have to go to an orphanage nearby. I'm crying and carrying on, terribly upset. We go past a gatehouse where Mom collects the money, big handfuls of bills. Then suddenly she's lying face down in the long grass nearby, reduced to an impression of her body and outstretched hands, fingers extended, nails long and blood-red.

The orphanage is horrible beyond description. The next day I put my hand into my pocket and realize I still have my keys. I decide to go spend one more night in my house, but when I get there I see a light in the basement, and opened, empty boxes in back: the new people have already moved in.

Every night for years before my father died — but never since — my dreaming unconscious used to display a magnificent kaleidoscope of fractal patterns undulating like manta wings, reds, blues, rich and various, impersonal and pure. I took them completely for granted; they'd always happened and they always would.

Those were the days.

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15

"Hi," Liam said when I'd ordered the screen to come on. "Just dashing in the door, were you?"

"Your powers of observation render me speechless," I told him dryly. I'd run in from the back yard and was puffing and flushed; we were having another heat wave in Salt Lake. I almost hadn't bothered to catch the phone, but now I was glad I'd made the effort. Liam and I hadn't talked in six weeks — not since Kentucky and the bradshaw.

"What were you doing?"

"Feeding the robins, out back. At this moment, six fledgling robins call me mother." For the past couple of summers I'd been hand-raising orphaned and/or injured birds for the local aviary. It was interesting and fun, but this year I was really much too busy to be doing it. Although the four healthy babies were flying well, all six still expected to be fed several times a day. I'd push open the screen door to the back yard and the quartet of good fliers would dive out of the apricot tree, straight for my head. Adolescent robins aren't little, tiny birds; I couldn't wait for this stage to be over.

"Feeding them what?" Liam wondered. "Worms and bugs? No wonder you're out of breath."

I shook my head. "Dry dog food softened in water. High protein content. Comes in a bag."

"Oh. Well, I won't keep you, I know you're as swamped as we are here. I just thought I'd check in to see how the bradshaw's going."

We exchanged looks. "Slowly," I said, "since you ask. It does seem to be going someplace, but I don't know where yet."

"The second shot hit the bull's-eye?"

"I think so. Hit the target, anyway. I really appreciate your staying to shoot it, by the way."

"Yeah." Liam regarded me thoughtfully. "You're welcome, I guess. Although to describe Eddie as pissed about it would be a feeble representation of the truth."

"Apologize to him for me. What about you — does this call mean you've decided to forgive me?"

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"For making me admit that I can't afford to lose you out of my life? I'll probably never forgive you for that. But Eddie being furious, the *interminable* train trip I suffered through, etc., etc., that's all water under the bridge. I called because I was interested."

And because you miss waking me up when something's on your mind, I thought but didn't say. We both knew why he'd called. Things being what they were with Liam and me, one of us had been bound to call the other eventually. "I haven't got time right now to fill you in completely," I told him, "but in a nutshell, I can't read the diary. The first time I tried, the pages were completely blank except for the printed dates and lines. The second time the writing was all in code."

"Code?"

"A code my friends and I made up to pass notes in school. Stars, triangles, pitchforks. I don't have a clue which symbols stood for what letters anymore."

"Codes can be cracked. Bring in an expert."

I shook my head. "I thought about that, but I've got this hunch that if the answer's going to be worth knowing, I have to discover it via the right process. Anyway, Julie wouldn't approve."

Liam laughed. "Let me guess. She'd say, 'You're the *real* expert, aren't you? You'll figure it out yourself when you're ready.'"

I laughed with him — Liam, a clever mimic, had nailed Julie exactly — before adding, "She's probably right, that's the hell of it. Listen, sorry to cut you off so fast but I was supposed to be back in my office five minutes ago."

As usually happened when I tried to hang up first, this triggered a perverse refusal in him to end the conversation. "Okay, but just tell me, what about the straw and the locket, were they in the diary?"

"*They* were there. Just no writing."

"I get it," he said eagerly. "Because you already *knew* they were in there and what they looked like. What you can't see is what you can't remember."

"I guess so." I looked at my watch.

"*She* remembers. You two kids need to learn to work together."

"Liam — "

"Okay! So long! Call me if you get a breakthrough."

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16

Dream Log, 6/10/37. I'm watching a preview of a viddy flick. A man with sharp features is driving a car like the one we had before the Hefn came. There's a passenger in the back seat, a woman. In his rearview mirror the driver sees the woman pull up her dress, which is like a long T-shirt, and whammo: out falls a perfectly beautiful set of male genitals. The driver sees this in the mirror; "we" (viewers) see it directly.

I rent the flick to watch in bed and fast-forward through it, trying to find that scene. Suddenly Mom climbs into the bed with me and lights a cigarette! I scream at her to "Get out of my personal space!" and force her out of the bed physically; there's a violent tussle and she's upset and cries. She goes off. I feel very bad and have an impulse to go after her, but fall asleep instead.

Dream Log 6/13/37. I'm awakened within the dream by the sound of a little girl crying in her crib, in the laundry room next to my bedroom in this house. The sink (actually full of orphaned Mallard ducklings in a cage at present) has vanished, and the crib stands in its place. Both rooms are black as pitch, but I get up, grope my way to the little girl, and put my arms around her. At the same instant I become aware that Dad is sitting in a rocking chair where the washer ought to be. He's facing the crib, and he's stone blind. He rocks in a gentle, regular rhythm, a little smile on his face. (This doesn't sound terrifying, but I woke up terrified.)

Later: another dream. I'm running the bradshaw. Little Pam and I are sitting across from each other on the bed. Again I ask her to try to get the code key for me. She activates her phone, which has turned into a modern wall-mounted videophone, and places the call. At once a smiling Liam appears on the screen, looking as he did at fifteen. When Pam explains that we need his help, he reaches right through the screen and hands her a big iron key like a dungeon key from some old horror show. "You kids need to work together," he says.

17

Julie frowned and rubbed the sides of her nose with her extended fingers. "Let's go back to basics for a bit. We know your father was

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inappropriate with you, and that your *mother* turned a blind eye. We know that his behavior made you so anxious in early adolescence that you developed a dissociative disorder, though you didn't realize his sexualizing of your relationship was the cause. You've spent a lot of time connecting feelings to events and doing the necessary grief work. What I'm wondering now is, where's all this anger at your mother coming from?"

"The business about the boomclox?"

"That's a factor, of course, but I'm not convinced that that accounts for all of it. There's a lot of fear in these dreams too. Could you be angry at her for leaving you the bradshaw, and afraid of what you might learn?"

"If I could read the damn diary," I told her wearily, "maybe I'd know."

18

"Oh good! I was hoping you'd come back," said Little Pam. "I wanted to ask you about something."

I sat down on the Dutch girl quilt. "Shoot."

"You know that time last spring when Steve and Charlie and I had a fight before church, and I didn't want to sit with them so I sat with Ninnie?"

Ninnie was a family friend, older than my parents, who occupied the same front pew every Sunday. Surprised that the program would let her bring up a subject I hadn't introduced first, I said "Sure I do."

"And before the sermon started, Dad made me leave and come home with him?"

I nodded. "He was furious, and you had no idea why. You were walking along next to him, trying not to cry. And finally he said, in this terribly angry voice, 'Why weren't you sitting with the boys?' And you said — " at this point Little Pam chimed in, and we chanted together, "I don't want to talk about it."

"And then," Pam finished, "he said, 'I don't suppose you'll ever want to talk things over with me.'"

She brought it all so near. "He sounded disgusted. You were totally bewildered. The whole thing just seemed like some big craziness."

"Yeah. Then we got home and I ran inside and threw myself on Mom,

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bawling my head off. She said, 'What in the *world* is the matter?' But I couldn't talk, I couldn't tell her. And anyway, I didn't *know*."

We sat silent for a bit. Finally I said, "So what's your question?"

Little Pam looked up at me soberly. "Well, you knew why Mom showed me the good boomclox before she took it back. I thought you might know what Dad was so mad about that time."

I got up, went around the foot of the bed, and sat down next to Pam. I put my arms around her tense little body and pulled her against me. She didn't resist, but neither did she respond. I didn't expect her to; Little Pam thought hugs were mushy, or thought she ought to think so. "I did finally figure it out," I told her. "He was mad because if you weren't going to sit with Steve and Charlie, he wanted you to sit with him."

She pulled away open-mouthed, totally flummoxed. "With *him*?"

I knew, of course, that the idea of sitting with Dad had never crossed her mind. Mom hadn't been in church that day for some reason; if she had been, maybe we might have sat with her instead of with Ninnie. But Dad, by himself? It simply never occurred to us. It would never have occurred to us in a million years.

"Now I've got one for you," I told her, releasing her from the circle of the embrace. "What happened next? After Dad came in. I can't remember."

"Mom just told me to go on up and change my clothes. They were talking downstairs. Then we had Sunday dinner."

So the episode had just been dropped. Mom had probably remonstrated with Dad for dragging us out of church, but neither of them had talked with us about it later, explained anything. We hadn't expected them to. They backed each other up through silence, believing instinctively that if nothing were said, it would be the same as if nothing had happened. I tended to think of Dad as the "problem," but it wasn't only Dad.

And suddenly I had a flash of insight about my recent dreams. I realized that *both* our parents, in their very different ways, had been stupid and cruel about plenty of things — and that neither had protected us against the stupidities and cruelties of the other.

Now I hugged Little Pam again, hard. "Dad wants to be closer to you, but he doesn't know how to make it happen. Then he gets frustrated when he can tell you don't enjoy being with him. But it's not your job to fix that,

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honey. He's the dad, it's his job, only he doesn't know how to do his job — and that's not his fault, either, but it sure as shootin' isn't yours, and it was really, really wrong of him to blame you and scare you like that."

Her arms clutched back at me, then let go. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand, as before, and sniffed a couple of times. Our tears always mostly ran down our nose, where they were less observable.

I got up. "I have to go now, but I'll be back."

19

"We're kind of getting to know each other," I reported to Julie. "Reminiscing almost. It's nice. She's a pretty unattractive kid, actually, but we sure do have a lot in common."

"And she needs you so badly, too."

I nodded. "I'd like to shake John Bradshaw's hand. All that hokey, cloying inner-child stuff? The hell of it is, he was right."

And a couple of sessions later: "We're sitting on opposite sides of the bed, chatting about her birthday — in 2013 she's got a birthday coming up — and she hands me the diary, I let it fall open in the middle — not really paying that much attention, for once — and then I see there's writing on the page, a pencil scribble, and my heart jumps into my throat. But then a second later I see what it is and start howling with laughter, and the poor kid gets upset — she thinks I'm laughing at *her*, at something she wrote. I had to convince her that wasn't it. Here, I keyed it out for you." I held the pad close to the screen so Julie could see, and read aloud: "Kotar Tublat yud gom-lul kambo yang ta nala zor den. Kotar b'wang Tublat om zan dano histah, ho yummas Kotar tand gree-ah ho gree-ah histah unk lul." Julie's baffled expression made me laugh again. "You don't recognize it? It's Ape English — Tarzan talk!"

Julie leaned forward, squinting at the screen. "Tarzan talk? You mean, it's a language?"

"But of course! My pal Steve and I learned a whole list of words of what was supposed to be the language of the Great Apes, from the Tarzan books, and we'd talk to each other in Ape while we'd be playing in the woods. It's a grammarless language, you just string words together. My name was Kotar, *ko* plus *tar* — Mighty White. Pretty braggy name for such a scrawny

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kid! Steve was Tublat — it means Broken Nose, but he just liked the sound of the word. Actually, *I* should have been Tublat, I was the one whose nose had been broken. Not that I knew that at the time."

"Pam, the suspense is killing me. What does this passage say?"

I laughed again, the Tarzan talk made me feel so happy. "Sorry to disappoint you, after all the build-up, but not much. It basically just says we went to the river bluff and swang on the rope swing and played sex games — Steve used to let me play with his penis and watch him pee, and I'd let him kiss me."

"You're dismissing sexual play as 'not much,' given your particular history?"

"What I mean is, nothing *new*. I've always remembered going to the woods with Steve after school, and the stuff we did."

Julie looked quizzical. "Which is the part that says 'sex games?'"

I held the pad up again. "I'm paraphrasing. *Yumma* was our word for 'kiss' — we made it up, Burroughs doesn't supply one. The Great Apes probably didn't go in for a lot of kissing. It says 'I held Steve's long skin-bone snake, many kisses, I didn't like that too much but I love it when his snake pees.' More or less. 'Pee' is 'go water,' literally — *unk lul*."

"Did you write in the diary in Ape, or is this another involuntary translation?"

"Hmm." I considered this. "Actually, something as purple as this passage I *might* have written in Ape. In high school, when I wanted to record something embarrassing or private, I'd switch into German."

"But was the rest of the diary in Ape?"

I shook my head. "The other pages were blank, it was just one entry on that one page."

"Well! This is all extremely interesting," said Julie with great relish. "Your unconscious is still protecting the diary's contents using a code from childhood, but now it's a code you're able to read. More progress!"

"Yeah," I said. "I believe it is."

20

"How are the robins doing?" Liam inquired. He'd called me twice more, very late at night, waking me on both occasions; it was like old

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times. P-mail would have been far less intrusive, but he didn't like p-mail; he liked exchanging live comments with a face on-screen, even a grouchy, sleepy face.

That being so, it was clever of him to ask about the birds. "Wingy, Pesky, or Gimpy?"

"These names you give them stun me with their originality. Gimpy would be..."

"The sick one — the one the dog roughed up, that's got everything wrong with her, leg, wing, eye, beak, *and* a bad cold. Ever hear a bird cough?"

"I didn't know they could."

"Me neither. Well, she'd been hobbling around for a week on one normal foot and one fisted-up foot. Then yesterday, all of a sudden the bad foot opened up and bingo: two sets of toes! And I know she has at least partial vision back in the bad eye. So the news on Gimpy is cautiously good."

"I had no idea birds caught cold."

"Well, it's a flulike virus of some sort. I stick the dogfood in and sometimes she spits it back out — her beak hurts, she can't swallow big pieces — and it comes out slimy. Yesterday I saw her blow a *bubble.* And she's always scraping her beak on things to clean it off. Then there's the cough, this little pathetic *hack hack.*"

"You're breaking my heart," said Liam. "Actually, you sort of are. She sounds like a wreck."

"She looks like a feather duster that got caught in a fan. Nobody thought she could possibly recover enough to be released, but after her foot unclubbed I started to hope."

I hadn't mentioned the bradshaw. Finally Liam could stand it no longer and asked how things were going.

"Still making slow progress," I told him. "If we get a breakthrough, you'll be among the first to know."

"Mind if I stick my, ah, beak in a little?" And when I grinned and didn't say no, "I don't mean to mess with whatever Julie's strategy is here, but I keep wondering if she's suggested that you ask the kid to help you."

I frowned. "No, I don't think so. Not even implicitly. Julie's been bending over backward *not* to make suggestions, even when I request

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them. She does interpretive stuff, but she's maintained the position from the start that I'll hit on the right approach myself when I'm ready."

"Oh."

I waited for him to go on, but he screwed his face into a skeptical mask and just sat there. Finally I said, "Come on, say what you're thinking. How can she help me out? The kid."

"See, Pam," said Liam, "it never occurs to you to ask for help. You didn't ask *me* to help you, when you realized you'd picked the wrong event and needed me to re-record your bradshaw. Instead you put our whole relationship on the line. You *forced* me to help you."

I blinked. "I shouldn't have had to ask. You should have offered."

Liam shook his head impatiently. "Maybe so, but that's not my point. My point is, *you* help people without thinking twice, but you don't expect people to help *you*, you always think you have to do it by yourself. If help's offered, you accept it, but you never ask."

I'd recognized this very trait in Little Pam, of course, and been uncovering its roots in her family life. "Hunh. Okay, I accept that. But you kept repeating that you weren't going to miss that plane no matter what. Are you saying now that all you wanted was for me to ask you nicely?"

"To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I'm not absolutely sure. Eddie was piling on the pressure, I might've felt you were asking too much. I don't mean you were," he added quickly, "but that's beside the point. What I would've decided back then is about me; and the point I'm trying to make now, and want to stick to, is about you not asking people for help."

"I did ask Julie," I reminded him.

"So you did. And she said you'd solve the puzzle by yourself when you were ready. But aren't you forgetting something? This kid isn't some other person, she *is* yourself! Julie's probably going nuts, wondering when you're finally gonna figure that out."

21

Little Pam looked up from the diary and gave me a big smile. "Hi!"

"Hi yourself," I said. "How're you feeling?"

"Better. Lots better. I love it when you come here."

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I sat down on "my" side of the bed. She held the diary out to me; but this time I smiled and shook my head. "I guess we both know by now that I can't read it by myself. So I've had an idea: how would you feel about reading it *to* me?"

She looked surprised, then uncertain. "Out *loud*?"

"Just the parts you don't mind reading out loud. You could skip anything you didn't want me to hear."

"It's not...I mean, I don't mind you knowing things. I mean, you already *do* know them. There's just some of it I don't like to say out loud."

Little Pam was almost morbidly hypersensitive to the power of words. "I know. You could leave those parts out, though, that would be fine."

"We-e-e-e-l-l..."

She wrinkled her fleshy nose, still not sure. Pressuring this child was the very last thing I wanted to do; I reflected that Liam was wrong and Julie right about not pushing things in this direction quite so soon. "You don't have to read any of it to me if you don't want to, honey," I reassured her.

But she surprised me. "No, I do want to. Really. It's just, you know, embarrassing." She bent the covers back, ruffling the pages. "Where should I start?"

In answer, I sang the mother's part from the end of *Amahl and the Night Visitors:* "'Are you sure, sure, sure?'"

"'I'm sure!'" she sang back, tickled to be in on the joke.

"Well then, how about just starting at the beginning?"

Whereupon, to my inexpressible relief, Little Pam flipped to the front of the red book and began: "January 1, 2011. We went to the candlelight service last night and I stayed up till midnight. Today I worked on linear algebra. January 2. Today I went to Doug's and we did linear algebra. I got all the problems right. It looked like snow all day but it never snowed. January 3. Today it snowed. I went sledding with Charlie on the scenic drive. There was a hefn on the viddy tonight, his name is Pomfrey!! January 4..."

I listened to her flat voice speaking these flat facts. After a while I shifted around and lay down on my back on the bed; and when Pam broke off inquiringly, "I'm just getting comfortable," I explained. "Don't stop, you're doing great."

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"February 9," she read. "Today I went to Hurt Hollow with Dad. We walked down the hill. I got to feed the goats."

I laced my fingers together across my stomach, closed my eyes, and let this voice possess me. Time passed, or was borne along on the all-but-expressionless murmur I floated within. Once I opened my eyes and glanced over to ask, "Are you getting tired? We could do some more next time."

"Nunh-unh, I'm fine," Pam said, and went right on: "May 12. Today we came to Louisville. May 13. I went to the store for Granny and we played Chinese checkers. Aunt Maude isn't feeling too well. I came to Grandma's for supper. May 14. Today we came home. I slept with Granny the first night and I went to Grandma's the second night. I fell off the couch in the middle of the night. I found three four-leaf clovers and one six-leaf clover. May 15. Today I worked on fractals..."

— but Pam had gone on without me. I lay in the dark by myself, breathing in the hateful smell of Grandma's living room, knowing that if I opened my eyes a tall shape would be stooping over the couch, but if I kept my eyes closed I wouldn't have to acknowledge its presence.

22

"Who do you think it might be?" Julie asked quietly. I'd called her from the VR parlor's public phone, whose cheap lens added ten years to her age (though the late hour may have added one or two).

"I feel like all that's keeping me from dying of terror is that I still don't know." Just thinking about it, I shook like an aspen leaf. "But it must have been Edgar, Dad's stepfather, Edgar Cranfill. You remember I talked about him. A really bad alcoholic. Arrested for exhibitionism one time. On our visits he'd either be sleeping it off in the basement or sitting at Grandma's kitchen table, all stubbly and reeking of whiskey, and I was supposed to act like I was glad to see him."

My teeth chattered as I said this. Julie looked concerned. "Time for a break? You could take a couple of weeks off, get used to the idea of what you'll be confronting — "

I shook my head. "No, I have to go right back in. The kid has no idea why I ran away like that. One second I'm lying on the bed with my eyes

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closed and the next I'm halfway out the door. She had this jolted look on her face—I don't even remember getting off the bed, I must have levitated! I have to get right back, as soon as I calm down a little bit."

Julie nodded. "Sounds like you're getting the hang of the gear, anyhow. Listen now: call me after you end the program tonight. Don't try to prove how tough you are. I'm here, and I truly want to help, and I'm very concerned that you pace yourself appropriately with this, okay?"

"Okay," I said shakily. "Thanks."

23

"Let's go back to the beginning of May, all right?" I'd apologized for bolting, and resettled myself on the bed. "I'd just like to go over that part again. We can do the rest another time."

"Okay, but I'm really not tired, so if you want me to keep going..." She found the place and began to read. "May 1. Charlie built a soap box racer and he gave me a ride but he pushed me too fast and it turned over. Mom made me come in. May 2..."

I waited tensely for the trip to Louisville, but knowing it was coming left me too well defended. The replay was unrevealing.

Despite the kid's protestations that she wasn't tired, I stopped the bradshaw when she'd read to the end of May; I was shuddering with fatigue myself. I put a quick call through to Julie and was stowing the gear in the hall locker when the pay phone beeped and blinked on, and Humphrey's dear hairy face peered benevolently down upon me. "Hello, Pam Pruitt," he chirruped.

His was the very last face I expected to see there. "Humphrey! I thought you were still hibernating! However did you find me?" I glanced up and down the hallway, but at this late hour we had the place to ourselves.

"I *was* asleep," he said, "but someone woke me."

The Hefn stayed awake round the clock for half the year, then slept for several months together, bedded down in their mother ship on the moon. Since only aliens ever went there, this rude arousal might mean that Humphrey was in trouble again for supporting us humans. "Why'd they do that? Will you be okay?"

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"I will be fine; I was to awaken in a few weeks' time in any event. And I had left standing orders that if you should initiate your bradshaw during my long sleep, and it should approach a climax, someone was to wake me. My dear, you must not waver in your resolve. You *must* complete the bradshaw, as quickly as you can."

It struck me then that Humphrey had eavesdropped on this evening's session. The Hefn were within the terms of their sales agreement to do that at any time, but I didn't like it that *Humphrey* hadn't given me advance notice, and found it irritating to be urged not to quit, when I'd had no thought of quitting. I said, rather resentfully, "Why 'must' I complete it?"

"Because there is so much important work to be done, and you are so badly needed."

"Humphrey," I said wearily, "You *know* I can't *do* the real work anymore, and what the Sam Hill has the bradshaw got to do with it anyhow?"

"We shall see. Perhaps nothing." He twinkled at me. "Go home and sleep now, my dear. I will stay in touch."

24

HE WASN'T GOING to tell me anything more, and I was too tired to think, so I did as he instructed: I biked home and went to bed and to sleep.

In my dream I'm lying again on the Dutch girl quilt, afloat within the uninflected sphere created by Little Pam's reading voice. I can't make out the words, but behind my closed eyelids I see myself get up from Grandma's living-room couch and wander into the kitchen. Dad is standing near the sink in the dark. He's aware of me but takes no notice and doesn't stop what he's doing. At first I don't understand what this is, but suddenly I realize his pants are unfastened and he's masturbating with his right hand, intending to ejaculate into the kitchen sink. In his left hand he's holding a metal bowl full of water and crushed ice, swirling the contents of the bowl rhythmically in time to the rhythm of his beating-off.

My reactions are two, and contradictory. I'm very turned on. And I'm frantic to get out of there.

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In my panic flight from my monstrous father I try desperately to wake up. I labor and groan, try to pry my eyes open, struggle against sleep with all my strength; but I'm weak as water. Despite everything I can do I'm still supine on the bed, and Little Pam's voice is still droning on, when out of the fog of words her voice says clearly: *Take Two.*

— and I'm back on the couch in Grandma's house. It's the middle of the night, and I'm lying on my back in the dark, on top of someone or something whose meaty hands I'm holding. Terror has suffused me utterly. I get up and walk into the bathroom, holding on with horror and loathing to the meaty hands. I'm just about to look in the mirror over the basin to find out who they belong to — shrinking away in anticipation — when *Take Three,* says Little Pam, and then *Take Four,* and each time the ghastly bradshaw of my dreaming starts the program at the same place: me on the couch in Grandma's dark living room, in the middle of the night.

Every "take" is different, but many of the same elements are incorporated into each: a male masturbator, a basin or sink usually full of water, myself as a very young child — much younger than eleven — in the role of participant/observer, and the emotional conflict of arousal and extreme fear.

25

"We're getting close," Julie said the next morning, stating the obvious. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Like horses have been kicking me all night."

"You don't look too chipper, I have to admit. Maybe you can catch a nap later. Have you had dreams like these before?"

I massaged my aching temples with my fingers. "Yeah, a few. Never a batch on the same night. There was the one about my cousin Will standing naked in front of a bathroom basin full of water, while two 'pornographic hands' — that's how they were styled in the dream — came up out of the water to help him masturbate. And the one about...well, about me sloshing Liam's penis around in the basin of a hotel bathroom, while a strange man in a navy blue suit stood by with his shriveled genitals exposed, saying 'You can do anything you like with these.' That's all I can remember, there might be others."

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"Affect of that last one?"

"Mixed. I wanted nothing to do with the icky man and his icky organs, and told him so, but still I touched his dick when he invited me to."

"Terror? Arousal?"

"Not that I recall. More like disagreeableness. Look, Julie..." She waited, holding perfectly still. "Would you consider monitoring the next one? I'm scared. Liam says I never ask for help. Well, I'm asking. I'm not sure I can do this by myself."

She smiled and nodded, looking and sounding as positive as possible, to reassure me. "You probably can, but why should you? I'd say right now is an excellent time to bring in flank support. Did Humphrey agree to monitor as well?"

"I didn't ask him to. He said he'd keep in touch, that's all. I tried to reach him this morning in Santa Barbara but he didn't answer, and I'm not even sure that's where he was calling from. Liam hadn't seen him — didn't even know he was awake. Something seriously weird is going on."

"Well," said Julie briskly, "Humphrey and I may have different perspectives and agendas, but we both agree that finishing your bradshaw is all-important. And whether he's there or not, I will be, whenever you want me."

So the following evening Julie was standing by when I entered the room of my childhood. That is, she was in VR hookup in Washington. She could monitor my vital signs — pulse rate, brain wave patterns, skin moisture — through transmitters built into the VR equipment; I'd connected myself up to them for the first time for this session. She could see everything in two dimensions on a lifesize screen: me and Little Pam, the bed with its handmade quilt, the bureau and its hideous boomclox, the row of books along the baseboard, the window streaming with sun. She could hear what both of us said, and if I were to address her directly she could answer me through the transmitters in my helmet; but, unless I did that, Little Pam would be unaware of the third party present at our meeting.

Pam couldn't see me, either, till I passed through the doorway. I stood outside for a minute first, readying myself, watching her write in the red book, trying to discern outward signs that she'd repeatedly gone through some hideous experience.

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Even to me, her surface seemed perfectly blank. If there was trauma there — and surely there was — it was very deeply buried.

I tapped on the door frame and stepped through smiling. "Hi, kiddo."

"Hi! Want me to finish the diary now?" She was all eagerness, relishing the attention.

"That would be way cool." I flopped down on the bed and, deepening my voice, sang Balthasar's question to Amahl, "'Are you ready?'"

"'Yes, I'm ready! '"

"'Let's go, then.'"

"June 1," she read promptly. "It was pretty today. I saw a yellow warbler and an indigo bunting at the Point. June 2. Mom wants me to take dancing lessons and I don't want to. I watched the Hefn program on the viddy. It was good. Dad got me a book at the library about the Hefn for my school report. June 3. I don't have to take dancing lessons, they cost money. Today Grandma came with Uncle Tommy. June 4..."

— and, without even an instant in which to signal Julie, I'm afloat upon the surface of the light flat voice —

— and watch myself get up from Grandma's couch and wander through the dark house to the bathroom. The door is partly closed. There's a light on inside, and a radio playing lively music. I reach up for the doorknob and push the door open wider.

Uncle Tommy is standing at the basin, running it full of water. He's back late from the race track, he's been playing the horses. He jumps when he sees me peering around the door — I've startled him — but then he smiles. "Hi, hon. Wanna see somethin' nice? C'mon in here, I'm gon' show you somethin' real nice." Tommy is wearing his dark blue sailor uniform; he joined the Navy when he was sixteen, not very long ago. I come closer, and now I see that the front of his pants is unfastened and hanging down, and behind the square flap is a round opening like a cave, and coming out of the cave is a thing like a big white snake.

My eyes fill with the white snake, and two feelings seize me simultaneously. One is intense sexual excitement and fascination. The other is guilt: I know I'll be punished if anybody catches me in here. I know this from the sneaky way Tommy's talking. He smells terrible when he talks.

"See it?" Uncle Tommy says, and I can't help myself, I come closer. I put up my hands and hold onto the edge of the basin. There's a towel

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folded against the basin's front edge, and the snake is lying on the towel. "See, now, this is my peter. Ever see a peter like this before?" I shake my head. "Well, it's kinda dirty so I'm washing it. Here, you can help. Let's just wet your hands and soap 'em up real good" — he holds my hands under the faucet and rubs soap on the palms — "and then you can help wash my peter for me."

I put my slippery hands around the snake and Tommy says, "Oh, Jesus." Then he says, "Just wash it off real good, just rub it up and down." I know I'm in terrible danger, but the snake feels hard and smooth. I love the feel of it. I love the silky skin of its pink head shaped like a blind frog's head, and the long shaft like a smooth enormous finger gloved in kid.

I lean my elbows on the sink and dunk the snake in the warm water and trace the lovely curve of its head with my soapy fingers; and then suddenly something happens. Tommy grabs my hands in his big ones and squeezes them hard around his peter, and stuff spurts out of the end, dirtying the water in the basin. He squeezes my hands on the peter and moans. Is he *crying*? I don't like this part, but Uncle Tommy's gasping like he's been running, he won't listen and he won't let go of my hands. The sleeves of my pajamas are wet, I'm trying to pull away and he won't let me go, and I start to get scared, and I start to cry. And then the door swings wide open and it's barefoot Grandma in her nightgown with her hair all mashed flat on one side, saying "Tommy Cranfill, what in tarnation are you doin' to that child? Pammy, you git yourself back into bed right this minute."

I can't, though. In the shock of being discovered, to my intense horror and shame I've wet my pajamas.

26

Little Pam's voice came abruptly into focus. "July 4. Today is the Fourth of July. We had a church picnic in Happy Valley. I climbed up the falls. Tonight they had fireworks at Scofield Beach and we watched them from the Point. July 5 — you're *crying*," she blurted, sounding scared out of her wits. She couldn't stand to see people cry, even other kids. She'd never seen Mom cry in her whole life.

I lifted my head from the pillow and smiled shakily to reassure her.

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"Yeah, I am, a little. It's okay to cry if you're sad, you don't have to be afraid of it. Nothing bad will happen."

"Are *you* sad? What about?"

"I can't explain right now, but don't worry, everything's okay. You're not making me sad. Go ahead, keep on reading."

So she did, nervously at first, then relaxing as the diary reabsorbed her attention. I lay there feeling the heavy rise and fall of my chest, listening, accepting what I heard; and finally "August 25," she read, "Today I packed for Louisville. I'm going to Granny's tomorrow by myself on the packet. That's all! That's what I was writing when you came in!" She slapped the book shut and beamed at me.

I sat up groggily; I was exhausted. "You're going to Louisville tomorrow?" She nodded. "Will you stay at Grandma's part of the time?"

Pam's face slipped a fraction. "I don't know. If Mom wants me to."

I circled the bed, sat beside her and pulled her against me fiercely. "If you stay at Grandma's, here's what I want you to remember. You don't have to do *anything* if it makes you feel bad. Not even if a grownup tells you to, and not even if you've done it before, and not even if Mom gets mad at you: if it makes you feel bad, *don't do it.* Refuse. Say no." I leaned back and looked into her face, brushing her stringy hair back from her face. "Listen to me. This is important. *You can say no.*"

She frowned, puzzled; she'd been conditioned all her life to believe that children weren't to bother, inconvenience, or disobey adults. She'd never been taught to protect herself, and — because Tommy's abuse, visit after visit, got consistently repressed — she had no idea why I was telling her these things in such a serious way. She said as much. "I don't get it."

"Never mind. Just remember what I said. Promise."

"Okay, I promise." And then, seemingly taking herself by surprise, she lunged against me in an awkward hug.

I hugged her back, stood up carefully; I felt heavy as lead. "Time to go now. Thanks very, very much for reading me your diary, honey, it's been a huge help. Did you leave much out?"

"Only a little part, about a book I read."

"Was it *Shane*?" She ducked her head, cringing, but nodded. "I remember. I don't blame you a bit. 'Bye now. Have a great time at

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Granny's." I tottered to the doorway, smiled back at beaming Pam, and closed the program down. "Julie? Did you get all that?"

"I did indeed. My phone's set up; we can talk right now, as soon as you're out of your gear."

27

Julie asked dutifully, "Are you okay?" but clearly she was dying to debrief me, and when I nodded she cut straight to the chase. "When Pam Junior read the entry for June 3, you slipped into deep trance. Pure alpha waves for eight minutes, then back to normal. What happened?"

I told her. "I don't think it was a dream. I think it was a memory, triggered by the reference to Grandma and Uncle Tommy."

"Do you know, in all this time you've never mentioned an uncle named Tommy."

Hadn't I? I reflected. "There didn't seem to be any reason to. He was Dad's half-brother, the son of Grandma and Edgar the Souse. Much younger. A very minor figure in my life, or so I thought. I had totally forgotten that Tommy lived in Grandma's house during the years Mom used to make me sleep over there on Saturday nights. He was between marriages and probably out of a job. But that was later; in the memory — dream? — whatever, he was wearing Navy dress blues. And I couldn't have been more than three, I had to reach up for the doorknob. By the time I've been talking about, four-plus years later, he wasn't in the Navy anymore."

Julie had her hot-on-the-trace look; her eyes were glittering. "As a child, how did you feel about Uncle Tommy?"

I was almost too tired to think, but I tried. "Actually, I kind of liked him when I was little — he played with me some, and I always thought he was good-looking. Though funnily enough, when I cleaned out the house after Mom died I came across some old holos of him and was surprised at how...dissolute and seedy he looked in them. Not handsome at all. Even in a portrait made when he was about twelve there was something wrong, and I know when I was a kid I thought he looked so cute in that picture. It fits, doesn't it? Julie — " I leaned toward the screen. "What do you think? Memory or dream? It didn't *seem* like a dream. No symbols, perfect narrative coherence — "

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"Well, it wasn't REM sleep. As I said, according to the readings you weren't asleep at all; it was a trance state, a very deep involuntary hypnotic trance. Now, I know you're done in, and we'll stop soon, but I'd really like to hear anything at all that you can remember about Uncle Tommy."

At once, to my surprise, a scene popped into mind. "Okay, here's something. One time — I was ten or eleven — I wrote, 'Souls I want to save: Uncle Tommy ' on the fly leaf of my Bible. And I've always remembered I did that, because Mom *told* him I'd written it. According to her, Tommy said he appreciated that and he'd think about it real hard. She was *pleased,* she thought Tommy was pretty much of a bum. She was pleased with me for wanting to save his soul." Thinking about it, I got agitated. "I know exactly where I was sitting — in the living room, at the hallway end of the couch — when Mom told me she'd done this, beaming with approval. I pretended not to mind, but I was embarrassed and stricken to realize she'd been snooping into my private stuff."

Julie shook her head, imagining our family. "Why do you suppose you wanted to save his soul? That seems kind of unexpected."

A wave of exhaustion broke and sloshed around me; the volume of energy required in heavy-duty therapy was a constantly renewed astonishment. In the midst of this wave I sat and remembered how Little Pam had read out the facts of her encoded life, in terse declarative sentences, skipping over the one place where her feelings were so intense they'd forced her to try to put them into words. But out of this assembling heap of dry little facts a static charge had built up and built up until the bolt had struck and stunned me. Only me: Little Pam felt nothing, as I'd felt nothing when I was Little Pam. Her feelings had been shoved down into a place where they would fester in the dark for nearly thirty years, because for thirty years there was nobody in her life who wanted to help her not suffer so much, or so she believed without question.

I answered Julie as best I could. "I don't know why. Maybe I thought, if he was saved, he'd leave me alone. There's something perverse about it, though, some kind of 'Love your enemy' thing. Tommy had an awful life, both Dad's brothers did." I looked up, startled by a thought. "I just remembered, one of my aunts told me Tommy's first wife was an abused child, she'd been raped by her *uncle*...her uncle, by God!"

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"Did Tommy rape you?" Julie asked quietly.

"Nobody ever raped me. Actually, Tommy was a diabetic; he may have been impotent as an older man. He had two wives but no children, *that* I know. But he must have gone for me, every time I spent the night at Grandma's while he was living there. Every time." I flashed on the menacing presence I had sensed leaning above me on the couch, that first day Little Pam had read to me from her diary, and gagged with claustrophobia, though what he might have done to me then I couldn't begin to guess. "Except," I added, "maybe not during the fifth grade, the year before this one. He might not have been living there that year."

Julie nodded alertly. "You kept the fifth-grade diary."

"Right."

"Is Uncle Tommy still alive?"

"No, not for years. He died of something to do with the diabetes. He didn't take care of himself at all."

My exhaustion was by now so extreme that Julie quelled her curiosity with a visible act of will and pushed back her chair. "We can go over it some more tomorrow. You need to get to bed. Just one last thing I'm not clear about," she couldn't help adding. "Your uncle abused you sexually, that now seems clear. You hated going to the place where he had access to you. Yet you speak of him without anger, almost with compassion. The anger and fear are all directed at your mother. Any thoughts about that?"

"What she did was worse," I replied at once; and for the first time in all my years of off-again on-again therapy with Julie I broke down in her presence, or at least her videopresence; I started to cry.

Julie had witnessed my exchange with Little Pam on the subject of crying, of course; but that was the bradshaw. This was the two of us, therapist and patient, and she tried not to appear to gloat as the tough nut cracked at long last before her eyes.

As for me, I was past caring. "Tommy was an ignorant simp. He used me but he didn't mean me any harm, he didn't know I'd be damaged, I'd lay odds he was Granddaddy Edgar's sex toy as a kid — maybe all those kids were, nobody in Dad's family knew a boundary from a turnip. But Mom loved me, and I loved her. She really loved me, and she betrayed me over and over and over. With Tommy the stakes weren't that high, there was no true betrayal, but with Mom — "

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I broke off, sobbing like a baby. "Take your time," said Julie, kindly if avidly.

"Mom *knew* I didn't want to sleep over at Grandma's," I said when I could talk, "but she made me go. She didn't care why I didn't want to, she only cared about not offending Grandma by letting me stay both nights at Granny's house. We'd all three get in the taxi and drive over there, and we'd have dinner, and then Mom and Dad would get back in another taxi and go back to Granny's in the dark, and leave me behind. And pick me up for church the next morning." By now I was bawling again.

"And you don't blame your father for allowing this to happen."

I mopped my face with a handful of tissues and blew my nose. "Whew. No. Well, *yes* — but not in the same way. He didn't care whether I went over there or not. Mom was the one who cared about preserving appearances — and, to be fair, about not hurting Grandma's feelings."

"But your feelings didn't matter."

"No," I said, and in spite of everything I still felt surprise at this sign that somebody — Julie — thought they did. "Dad didn't stop her, true, but if I'd appealed to him...I just hit on this: if I'd pleaded with him to stick up for me, if I'd told him how much I didn't want to go, he might very well have intervened with Mom."

"But you didn't."

"It never, ever occurred to me. Like it never occurred to me to sit with him in church that time. On some level of my childhood, he just didn't exist."

28

The next morning I called in sick. Then I called Julie and put her off till after the weekend. Felled like a tree by the bradshaw's revelations, I lay all day on the living-room couch in my pajamas and bathrobe, the tattered Dutch girl quilt tucked round me. I turned off the phone, kept the blinds closed, ignored the mail, and generally treated the reaction I was having like a bad case of flu, rousing myself only to feed the robins their disgusting lumps of dogfood.

I'd been napping, I guess, when the doorbell woke me. I glanced at the clock: nearly midnight. Whoever was out there must be on urgent

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business, but I simply didn't care. Another long *brrrring!* sounded, and another, while I lay in my apathy, wishing the importunate caller away. Instead, brief silence was followed by the scrabbling of a key in the lock; and, before I could bestir myself enough to rise from my bed of misery and confront the intruder, a stumpy figure in a hooded cloak had slipped inside and closed the door. "Hello, my dear, hello. No, no, don't get up."

Hefn can see perfectly in the dark, but I can't; I sat up and reached above my head to switch on a lamp. And there, of course, was Humphrey, his gray visage bristling and peering out of the draped maroon folds of his cavernous hood. He made a hilarious sight, but I wasn't in a laughing mood. "You look exactly like one of Tolkien's dwarves in that getup. What brings you here at this hour?" Or at all, I might have asked, since as far as I knew he should have been in Santa Barbara.

"I am traveling incognito." (This did make me grin in spite of everything.) Throwing back the hood, he shrugged off his cloak and stepped over it to straddle the Hefn chair I kept around the house for him. "Did I not say I would stay in touch? And has your phone not been turned off all day? I was not speaking idly, Pam Pruitt. There are things I must now tell you. Now. Immediately."

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but the main thing Humphrey had to tell me made me feel worse than I did already. It turns out that my mother hadn't sacrificed and saved to buy me my bradshaw. The bradshaw represented no vote of confidence from beyond the grave, because Mom hadn't given it to me at all. He had.

"I always found it do you say hard to swallow that a mathematical gift like yours, so powerful, so elegant, could be *only* a mere means of escaping a painful situation. I did not believe that such a gift could simply be discarded, when escape was no longer required," he explained, all unawares, while I clutched the quilt tight around me, blindsided by this new grief. "When we began to market the bradshaws, it came to my attention that a bradshaw, used effectively, could restore power to people who had for various reasons of trauma lost their power. And the more attention I paid, the more it seemed to me that some of these people were not unlike you, and some of this lost power was not unlike your own.

"But I saw also difficulties. The frontal attack was not a way to success. Nor could the customer be coerced. In every instance, the lost

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power returned incidentally, a byproduct of a freely chosen confrontation with the *source* of trauma. Unhappily I was forced to conclude that to press a bradshaw upon you and urge you to use it, in a deliberate attempt to regain what you had lost, must result in failure."

As far as I knew, this was more by a good deal than human psychologists had figured out about bradshaws. While most of my mind remained stunned, some small piece registered Humphrey's summary, aware of how much it would mean to Julie.

"I schemed therefore, I plotted. The Bureau needed you back. The work needed you back. *I* needed you, most urgently." His wide flat eyes gleamed and his oddly jointed arms made stabbing gestures in the air; I'd rarely seen him so excited and never so thoroughly pleased with himself. "There were other reasons why I could not openly, directly, as myself, make a bradshaw available to an employee of the Bureau of Temporal Physics — you understand? — but when Frances Pruitt became ill I saw an opportunity. I obtained a copy of her will, and I altered it."

I felt a stab of hope. "Did Mom provide you with the copy of her will? Did she know what you were up to?"

"No no no, indeed not, my dear, she knew nothing. I never spoke with her of this. But when she died, I acted. I substituted the altered will for the genuine one, and supplied a voucher for the bradshaw. There was then nothing more to be done, but to hope that you would use the bradshaw soon, and that using it would restore your gift."

Humphrey crowed on about the excellent chance that remembering what Tommy did had indeed unblocked my intuition, and how he would set about testing me to find out. I sat hunched in the semidarkness, so angry I didn't trust myself to speak. Telling him how I felt would have been pointless; the delicate crime he'd perpetrated, by raising false hopes about my mother's faith in me, isn't the sort of thing a Hefn understands. By his own lights he had done well; and I think I realized even then that false hopes were part of what had empowered me to work past the obstacles and tolerate the terrors of running the bradshaw.

But if I refrained from remonstrating, still it was impossible to forgive Humphrey, that evening, for his stupendous presumption. I refused to let him test me then and there; and after he'd swirled the wizard's cloak around himself and stumped upstairs, to work at my computer complex

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till morning, I had no heart to put myself properly to bed. I fell on my side, pulled the quilt up under my chin, and went back to sleep where I lay.

29

TWO DAYS AFTER Humphrey's visit, Pope Miguel I and Klas-Göran Ormelius, Head of the United Nations, met with Alfrey and Pomfrey at Thingvellir, the Hefn base in Washington DC. Miguel declared that he could no longer in good conscience counsel the Catholic countries to patience and restraint. Ormelius wasted no time making threats he couldn't carry out; he simply told the aliens that U.N. forces were inadequate to deal with widespread social chaos of the type we were beginning to see, and pleaded with them to lift the Baby Ban, as the sole means of avoiding a complete breakdown of international order.

The Hefn acknowledged the realities of the world situation by agreeing that on New Year's Day 2038, a little more than six months from that day, they would either present humanity with a final plan for keeping its numbers within bounds — or return to the moon and the ship and depart, leaving Earth to her fate.

30

The next evening I called Liam to discuss the BTP's redefined situation. The Hefn and their human collaborators now had just about half a year in which to throw everything we had at discovering the workable population-control strategy that had so far eluded us. The months ahead would be filled with very hard work. We all understood that everything was at stake; we had to find some model in the past with power to instruct and inspire the future, if human beings were to have a future on Earth at all. No one at the Bureau of Temporal Physics was despairing; the urgency of the situation only made them all the more determined. That was how I felt myself. Probably it was how the scientists on the Manhattan Project felt, and the ones at NASA before the first moon shot.

Deadline pressure had already had a terrifically energizing effect on

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Liam. My call found him in top form, bursting with resolve and fresh ideas. He'd made plans to leave in a few days for the Four Corners region, on the powerful hunch that if we could discover exactly why the Anasazi people had abandoned the Mesa Verde area and migrated south, that information might shed some useful light on our own problem.

I'd vaguely assumed that all the really popular mysteries must have been cleared up years ago. "You mean we still don't know what happened to the Anasazi? What have the anthropologists been doing with themselves all these years?"

"Nobody ever went down there with a transceiver to find out. They've got about fifteen different competing theories about what happened, and turns out they all feel like it would be cheating not to figure it out from potsherds and tree-rings."

I shook my head at this interesting example of human behavior. "I thought we were supposed to call them Hivasu or something now. The Anasazi."

Liam grinned. "Hisatsinom. Not at present. What have *you* been doing with yourself, all that time in Utah? Anasazi is the Navajo word for 'ancient enemies,' but the Anasazi are ancestral to the modern Pueblos. It's political, it goes back and forth. *This* week it's correct to say Anasazi. Did you just call up to chat, or have you got something to report?"

So I told him about my "breakthrough." Even in the midst of his planning Liam had enough surplus energy to find the story fascinating, and was quick to claim credit for the part he'd played: "Didn't I *tell* you you and the kid should work together?"

"You did. You were right, O Genius. Thank God you stayed and shot that second bradshaw."

A look passed between us, establishing that Liam was by this time actually glad he'd given in, but wasn't going to come right out and say so. Instead he said, "You're better off knowing, then?"

"Yes, technically I'm sure I'm better off, and Julie thinks so too. I can't honestly say I *feel* better yet, but I think I will eventually."

"Yeah, well, that's an article of faith with Julie. Ironic, isn't it? Your mom leaves you the bradshaw, and here it turns out that in a way the primary villain of the story is your mom!"

"Ironic indeed." I thought how this result would have infuriated her,

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how angrily she would have defended against it, and felt a wrench of grief like a muscle cramp.

Liam, alert and sensitive today, said at once, "Funny how the personal life always perks right along regardless, whether or not the world's going to hell."

"You've noticed that too, eh?"

"Have I ever." He paused. "So things are pretty good? Speaking personally."

"I'd say," I said carefully, "speaking personally, that things are better than might be expected, but that all this will take some getting used to. How are things in Santa Barbara? How's Eddie?"

"Eddie's okay. Listen, I should have told you first thing — Humphrey showed up here this morning."

"I know, I talked to him."

"He's calling a general meeting out here, did he tell you that?"

I nodded. "He wants me to come out. Are the dates on the calendar yet?"

"Not the exact dates. Whenever Jeffrey and Godfrey come out of hibernation — couple of weeks, something like that. We're supposed to be prepared to drop everything when the word comes down. I'll be back from New Mexico by then, processing my data like mad to get it ready in time to present."

"And I'll be up to traveling by then. Let me know if you want some help with the data."

"Thanks, I might at that. What did you mean, 'up to traveling by then?'"

I felt a wicked smile spread across my face, the first in a long, long time. "I've scheduled some elective surgery. Nothing to be concerned about, just something I should have taken care of a long time ago. And don't ask," I said as he opened his mouth to do so, "I want to surprise you." I didn't add that I would also have a far more amazing, more wonderful surprise to spring — purchased at a brutally high price, but none the less wonderful in the end for that.

Liam, however, looked smug. "You're getting a cosmetic remake as a Hefn. I knew it would come to this eventually." And when I only grinned, refusing to take the bait — and when he sensed I was about to

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break the connection — he forestalled me by saying quickly, "So, uh, how's avian life perking along in a world gripped in crisis? How's Gimpy?"

I was being manipulated, but this time I didn't mind. "Gimpy, my lad, is the greatest success in my entire career as a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Rehabilitation Permit sub-permittee. I told you her foot opened up and her eye was better? Well, just in the past two days she started eating by herself — and *whole* pieces of dogfood, so her beak must have healed up."

"Ever figure out what was wrong with it?"

"Broken, I guess. Sprained? The upper and lower halves didn't meet right. Anyway, that's not all. Her broken wing had healed too, she'd started flying a little, but just low to the ground. Well, because of all the cats I'd been making the other robins sleep in the apricot tree — "

"How do you *make* a bird sleep in a tree?"

"You grab it and throw it up in the air as hard as you can, right at dusk. It'll come down in a tree and stay there. Anyway. Gimpy couldn't fly *or* perch, so she'd been spending the night on the back of a folded lawn chair. Then yesterday afternoon she went missing."

"And you went looking for a corpus delecti."

"I did. But I finally found her next door, way up in a big lilac bush. She looked like she'd climbed up there using both wings and both feet, but she was up higher than my head in the thing, and I figured if she could do that, maybe she *could* perch on a tree limb. So last night I stuck her up in the apricot tree, to see what would happen. And she held on! She spent the whole night up there, and flew down out of it this morning when I went out to serve breakfast, looking for all the world like a normal bird. Well, a normal bird who'd been through a truly terrible experience." I laughed; I was extremely happy about Gimpy's recovery. "And she gobbled up her dog food, and I haven't seen her since. I think maybe she's taken off. Two of the others have. She finally got over her cold."

When I concluded my tale with an enormous yawn, Liam relented and said goodnight and see you soon. I repeated my offer to help analyze Anasazi data if time were tight, and hung up.

What I'd refrained from saying — though he would know soon enough — was that I wouldn't be frittering away the next frenetic months in exile in Salt Lake City. After flying out to Santa Barbara for Humphrey's meeting, I'd be staying for the duration.

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Still wiped out from the upheavals of the past few days, I told the phone not to bother me till further notice and went straight to bed. No sooner had I burrowed under the covers and doused the light than I was out cold; and almost that soon the kaleidoscope of fractal dreams began to revolve, transmigrating one pattern into the next, just as it had each night since the night of Humphrey's midnight visit.

Pure fractals were all it showed me. I didn't dream about my relatives at all.

—for Shayne Bell

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR DECEMBER ISSUE will close out the year in style. Phyllis Eisenstein graces us with "The Island in the Lake," a new tale of the minstrel Alaric (whom you surely recall from many stories past). Alaric chances upon a poisonous lake with an island rising from its midst, and more poisonous doings that transpire within the castle thereon. It's a fine heroic fantasy and a nice return to our pages for the bard.

We'll also have some far-future SF, compliments of Paul J. McAuley. "Back Door Man" tells the tale of a lineman, a software repairman who works within the complex matrix of the Internet.

December traditionally being a time of miracles, we'll have one on hand from Jerry Oltion. "The Miracle" might ruffle a feather or two among the devoutly faithful, but scientifically minded folks are sure to be intrigued by this one.

We'll also have book columns by Michelle West and Charles de Lint, Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty will ask us to follow the bouncing ball, and plenty more. Looking ahead to 1999, there loom on the horizon stories by Esther M. Friesner and Robert Reed, Dale Bailey and Albert Cowdrey, and lots lots more. Keep an eye on our Web site at www.fsfmag.com for an occasional sneak preview and keep your subscription current if you don't want to miss any of the goodies.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Scissors Cut Paper, Paper Covers Schlock

"If Stephen King, John Grisham, and Michael Crichton got together, they'd become one of the top three publishers overnight."

— Morgan Entrekin, publisher for Grove Press, quoted in *The New Yorker*, 10/6/97.

SWEATING despite the cool recirculated air, his nervous stomach spasming, his lanky shock-cushioned body nearly folded in half around various struts and controls, Michael Crichton IV rolled into the luxurious boardroom of KGC Publishing, secure in the cramped interior of his armored trundlebug. This model, equipped with a wide range of sensors, weapons, and defenses, was the same one used by the troops of such protectorates as Microsoft-Snapple and Harvard-Sam Adams. Nothing short of an illegal quantum-disruptor could penetrate *this* heavy carapace.

With the announcement Crichton IV intended to make today, he knew he'd need every ounce of shielding.

No one could be counted on to react more fiercely than partners betrayed.

Not that Crichton IV's confederates were especially pleasant even when coddled. Their three-way partnership was riven with strife. Day-to-day management of KGC involved too many violent emotions, too many bruised artistic sensibilities. Literary trespassing and poaching, even if unintentional, on what the partners deemed their personal territories raised hackles and frequently brought down massive internecine firepower. This was the forty-second headquarters they had gone through in the nearly one hundred years of their existence — and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

Assuming KGC even continued to exist after today.

Crichton IV tracked his vehicle

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around the teak conference table and into a power position from which he could monitor the entrance to the boardroom. Calling this meeting for ten A.M., he had deliberately arrived before the others so as to secure the most advantageous spot. One of the building's load-bearing beams ran directly above him, and he hoped it might serve to protect him from the eventual falling debris.

Now on his monitors Crichton IV saw his partners arrive, concealed in their own armored carriers. Deliberately built only wide enough for one vehicle at a time, the boardroom door was the first test of status. Crichton IV watched as Stephen King VI and John Grisham III jostled for precedence, with King VI eventually winning. Crichton IV wasn't surprised: King VI was as daring and impulsive as all of his identical ancestors, taking risks the other partners shied away from. That was why there had been six of him, though, compared to four Crichtons and three Grishams.

Now on two of Crichton IV's screens popped up the images of his partners. Neither of them looked very happy.

"You'd better have a damn good reason for making me haul my ass away from my studio this early in the morning," said King VI. "I barely got fifty pages written since breakfast."

"I concur," said Grisham III. "We might have the basis of a suit or at least an actionable tort here. *Scribendi interruptus.*"

Beating around the bush wouldn't make the fateful words any easier to say. Crichton IV cleared his throat with a rasping sound and uttered the deadly sentence.

"Gentlemen, I want to resign—"

Ravening gouts of belligerent hell-energy erupted from the one-man tanks of his partners, setting off coruscating force-shield reactions amongst all three. Instantly, the walls of the boardroom were reduced to atoms, opening the suite to the cool air two hundred meters above ground level. The ceiling was partially evaporated, along with a good-sized chunk of the seven remaining floors above, and a radiant flare shot out from the top of the KGC building, as if signaling construction crews to begin pouring the foundations for HQ number forty-three.

Thank god I gave the publicity department the day off, Crichton IV thought.

Luckily, the floor of the boardroom was reinforced with the same

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material used in the Quito Beanstalk, so the partners did not plunge to the basement. Instead, they remained in place for the downfall of debris that quickly followed the spectacular attack. And, as Crichton IV had foreseen, King VI and Grisham III were buried, while he was protected by a truncated portion of the building's structural components.

Quickly, before his opponents could extricate themselves, Crichton IV whipped his trundlebug over to the junkpiles and extruded two metal tentacles which burrowed down intelligently to the immobilized vehicles, clamped on, and administered a paralyzing surge that fried their electronics. Into the defenseless tanks, the tentacles next insinuated audiovideo feeds under the control of an exultant Crichton IV. The shaken but unharmed faces of King VI and Grisham III reappeared on his screens.

"Okay, you two — now you're going to listen to me."

His partners scowled, but acquiesced, having no choice in the matter.

"I said I wanted to resign, and you two immediately assumed I was joining another firm, a rival."

"Well, what else would we think!" King VI shouted. "That *has* to be what you're up to!"

"Who is it?" queried Grisham III in his coolest prosecutorial tones. "Clancy, Koontz, and Steel? No? Don't tell me you're still entertaining those laughable literary pretensions you once had. You'd never get an offer from Updike, Mailer, and Bellow, not in a million years. Or are you finally affirming your genre roots? Did you cut a deal with Bear, Benford, Brin, Baxter, and Egan?"

"None of those. I'm striking out on my own."

King VI laughed harshly. "You fool! You'll lose all the synergy of our partnership, all the economies of scale. Your rackspace in the protectorate retail outlets won't be guaranteed anymore. Your brandname will sink like a stone."

"I'm retiring not just from publishing as we currently practice it, but from writing as well," Crichton IV announced. This unbelievable statement shocked his soon-to-be-ex-partners into silence. "I think the Crichton lineage has said all it can say over the past century. I also think the same is true for all the rest of us amalgamated, incorporated writers. But of course that's a recognition I leave each individual to reach on his own. No, I plan to

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embark on a new venture entirely. Gentlemen — I'm going to become an early-twentieth-century-style publisher."

An even deeper stunned silence greeted this announcement, until finally Grisham III found his tongue. "You mean, soliciting manuscripts from non-commodified, even previously unpublished writers and printing small and medium-sized quantities of an extensive number of titles twice a year, risking your own money while trusting the marketplace to discriminate between good books and bad?"

"Precisely."

"You're bughouse!" exclaimed King VI.

"Not at all. It's the only way out of the stagnant, uncreative pool we're drowning in. The only books that see print nowadays are predigested, by-the-numbers, focus-group-approved rehashes of past bestsellers. We've killed the vital kind of fiction that once existed. Face it, gentlemen — we're dinosaurs squashing the life out of the very field we profess to love."

King VI snorted. "Shoulda known the dinosaurs would come into this somehow."

Grisham III spoke. "How do we know this, ahem, disclosure is not some roundabout way of stabbing us in the back? What guarantees do we have that this is not an underhanded plot?"

"I'm not joining Pynchon, DeLillo, and Erickson, believe me."

"It's a sob story," said King VI. "He's just angling for a bigger share of the profits."

"And I'm not joining Krantz, Collins, and Pilcher either. No, I'm telling you the simple truth. I'm going to start an old-fashioned publishing firm, one that doesn't even bear my name. I'm thinking of calling it Andromeda Publishing. Our motto will be: 'A new strain of books.'"

"Well, in that case, if you don't need your name, we'll just clone you again. I'm sure Crichton V will see things our way."

Crichton IV smiled. "You forget, gentlemen, the medical training associated with my lineage. I've secured all my cell-samples from the corporate vaults, and incinerated my living quarters. There'll be no more Crichtons after me. That's part of the problem, not the solution."

Finally admitting defeat, the two abandoned partners addressed each other.

"I suppose we'll just have to merge with some other hacks in order to compete."

"The mystery field has been

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having a good year. Let me initiate negotiations with Leonard, Hiassen, Burke, Vachss, and Westlake."

Satisfied that he could now take his leave safely and embark on realizing his new dreams, Crichton IV began to reel in his audiovideo taps, but was brought up short by a shout from King VI.

"Hey, Mikey!"

"Yes?"

"Uh, would you read something by a friend of mine named Richard Bachman?" ☙

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FOR OFFICE VERITÉ

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For this story, we have the good graces of Henry Wessells to thank (not to slight Mr. Davidson's own contributions to it, of course). Henry maintains an Avram Davidson newsletter, The Nutmeg Point District Mail *(check out http://www.kosmic.org/members/dongle/henry/ for more info), and he has been assembling a bibliography of the late Mr. Davidson's work. During the course of his investigations in the Texas A&M University library, he discovered a manuscript entitled* The Corpsmen, *an unfinished novel from the mid-1950s that was Avram's first sustained attempt at a novel. The book consists of a series of loosely connected character sketches about members of the WWII Naval Medical Corps stationed in Mullet Bay, Florida, and one such sketch stands up well as a complete story. We're happy to bring it to you.*

Recent books of Mr. Davidson's include The Boss in the Wall *and the upcoming collections* The Avram Davidson Treasury *and* The Investigations of Avram Davidson.

Blunt

By Avram Davidson

HE HAD THE USUAL MOUNTAIN boyhood in one of those mountainous counties below the Mason-Dixon line — differing from most other such counties only in being one of the few that regularly voted Republican — where there was not much schooling; but somewhere in the course of what schooling there was, Huey P. Blunt read a piece about yellow fever and the Panama Canal and how one was conquered so the other could be built, and he decided to be an Army doctor. Someone (in after years he tried to remember who first told him, but so many people had agreed and repeated it and everyone took it for granted it was correct) told him that the way to do it was to enlist soon's he was old enough and work his way up. Blunt wasn't talkative and he was six months in the Army before anyone there knew of his plans, and before he learned what they were worth. What they were worth officially, that is. He made them worth something, after all, by an illegal conversion of knowledge. He listened, he watched, he read, he worked; and he learned much. The Army Medical Corps taught him more than it planned to. Blunt had deft hands and a good memory.

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After his enlistment expired he went back to the hills, to his home country. There was a very old man practicing medicine there, his name was Elnathan Wisonant, and he had never been to college either, having picked up all his knowledge of medicine as apprentice to his father, a "doctor" of similar status. At one time there were many practitioners of that kind around — it would not be accurate or fair to call them quacks — they represented an older tradition in native medicine than the A.M.A. — they supplied the only care available at a time when medical schools were few, and not too well thought of, either. Gradually they became extinct. For the last forty years of his career old Wisonant had been protected by a state law that exempted all those in the trade at the time the law was passed from having to meet the qualifications required thereafter. Blunt became his assistant, which meant that he very shortly took over most of the hard work while old Wisonant sat by watching and advising, and speaking ill of "college doctors."

"Horse-leeches," he called them; "bumshavers, quacksalvers, peddlers of snake oil and pink aspirin.

"A trust, a vile and contemptible monopoly, a guild of grave robbers aping their betters among the natural philosophers," he would snarl.

One morning the old phlebotomist was found on the floor of his office, white beard pointing to the ceiling. Although urged by the hill people to carry on and the hell with them city doctors and their laws, Blunt declined. Roads were coming into the hills, and automobiles. The day the old man was buried from the little church of the Foot-Washing Baptists, Blunt was approached by the only representative of Big Business in the county, the manager of a lumbering outfit that was winding up operations, there being no forests left worth ravaging.

"We can use you out in ——," he said, naming a western state.

"You know I haven't got a license," Blunt said. The lumberman's reply was brief and obscene.

"Can you set a broken leg? That's what counts," he continued.

On the advice of the lumberman Blunt went out to the western state and told the company's hiring agent that he was a former medical student whom lack of finances had forced out of school. His story, enriched with details from the gossip of the Army doctors, sounded reasonable; but the company was not too particular. Few doctors were available for the rough

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life of the logging camp, and the supply of those whom liquor, malpractice, or conviction for criminal abortion made available was rather short at the time. He spent several years in the woods before he moved on.

Once, he bought an interest in a small town drug store, chiefly to improve his knowledge of pharmacy. He was not a businessman, and when his partner took to tapping both the till and the *spiritus frumenti*, Blunt did not wait for the end, but just walked out. There are agencies that never advertise, as their business, though needful, is illegal. Through one of them Blunt became *le docteur* on a sisal plantation in Haiti; he added, to the professional journals to which he subscribed, one on tropical medicine.

All that he did, he did with seriousness and sincerity, and as much capability as was possible under the circumstances — which was a great deal more than the medical monopolists could have afforded to admit, if they had ever known about him. They never did, of course, because he went to places that never saw them.

Unlike the woman of Valor, who (we are assured on the best authority), Laugheth at the Time to Come, Blunt never even thought about it. He was in British Honduras when the European war broke out, but paid it little attention until the invasion of Denmark and Norway by a people who might have eventually become civilized, had the British in the early part of the previous century not prevented the French from continuing to civilize them. Something stirred in the heart of Huey P. Blunt as he read the accounts of the armed parachutists dropping from the troubled sky. He went back to the United States and enlisted in the Navy.

So there was Blunt at thirty-odd: big, balding, not very talkative, not much booklearning, no licenses, but a lot of practical experience for a Pharmacist's Mate, First Class. His advancement in rating was indefinitely postponed because he lacked the requisite six months duty at sea or overseas required of chief petty officers in "non-specialized" ratings. By the Byzantine logic of the Navy, a Pharmacist's Mate, 1/c — who had to know First Aid, Minor Surgery, Anaesthesia, Materia Medica, Anatomy, Physiology, Nursing, Hospital Administration, Embalming, and so on — was not considered a specialist; while Physical Culture instructors, whose only duty and only qualification was the ability to direct mass push-ups, *were* so considered, and were rated CPOs *en bloc*. In the ordinary course

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of an ordinary tour of duty in the Hospital Corps a Ph.M. 1/c would have been certain to get sea duty, and thus, a rating as Chief.

But Blunt's very competence undid him. He knew too much.

"I can't spare you, sorry," Dr. West told him each time he put in for sea duty.

"Long's they know he kin do ever detail here and do it better than enna bodda else, Ol' Huey goin stay here" — Tester to Pawson.

"Ol' Huey's a mighty good man," Pawson said, but neither the "Ol' Huey" or "the mighty good man" indicated affection. No one liked Blunt, no one *dis*liked Blunt, no one told any stories about Blun;, there were none to tell. Blunt had no personality. He was not a character. He had no existence apart from his rank — which he did not abuse — and his skill — which, by its greatness, baffled and discouraged speculation. If orders came in for a Ph.M. 1/c to be shipped out, the SMO saw to it that another one was shipped. Once Blunt, on leave, went to Washington, and pulled strings, but Dr. West, when he saw Blunt's name on the orders, pulled more strings; and was authorized to make a substitution. The other First Class Mate was older than Blunt, he was married and had two children, but he knew incomparably less and he was lazy and inefficient; and for these failings was destined to die while splashing his trembling and middle-aged legs through the lukewarm waters of a tropical beachhead.

But before that happened, Blunt had fallen in love.

Wilma Swanson's family belonged to one of the several colonies of Yankees settled in Cataline. Besides the usual superannuated railroad men and retired wholesale plumbing dealers, besides the seekers after more sunshine and health, there was a group drawn to Cataline by the presence of a small denominational college that Had a Good Name. At one time it had been Southern terminus for the Chatauqua Circuit. Retired clergymen, retired schoolteachers and principals, even retired deans and presidents of other denominational colleges (small), had settled in Cataline so as to take advantage of its advantages.

Mrs. Swanson said that Cataline had *everything*.

"There's this lovely old town and those beautiful oak trees and Spanish moss. And the lovely flowers, all the year round. There's Mullet Bay, and the St. George River, and the ocean — lovely swimming and fishing and boating and water games. There's Vallance Beach just a short

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ride away, and Seminole Springs. There's this lovely little college and the intellectual atmosphere it creates here. There are some lovely people who winter here — call them Snowbirds, if you will, but I say that some of them are just lovely. As for the year-round people, well, you just won't find a lovelier community; that's all. And the Colored People are simply lovable. That's why I say that Cataline has everything."

Mr. Swanson backed her up in all this, but since he had Investments locally, naturally, he saw things from another point of view as well.

"There's your naval stores," Mr. Swanson said; "your turpentine and rosin. There's your citrus fruit. There's your lumber. There's your real estate. And I must add," he added, "last but not by any means least, there's your Sunshine and your Clean, Fresh Air."

Wilma had gone to Cataline College and graduated. She had majored in Domestic Science, that being what the aptitude test had suggested for her.

Somehow, no young man from a lovely family had ever offered to provide Wilma with the domesticity. Mr. Snyder, to be sure. Mr. Snyder, a fine Christian gentleman, had once hinted to Mr. & Mrs. Swanson that...but then, Mr. Snyder was getting on in years, he had low blood pressure and a married daughter.... No. Wilma could do better than Mr. Snyder, lovely man though he was. There was no hurry. Mrs. Swanson had been much older than Wilma when *she* married *Mr.* Swanson. Wilma was a lovely cook and had such a warm personality, and, really, when she took off her glasses, you could see that she had lovely gray eyes. Only she seldom took them off because she couldn't see very well without them. So Wilma stayed at home. Then, when the war started, she had so much wanted to Do Something, and it was really very fortunate in its way that Miss Olauson, who was Dr. Wondermaker's nurse, had joined the Army. Of course, Wilma wasn't really a nurse, but she had her Red Cross card in first aid, she made even the most nervous patients feel at ease; and besides, there just weren't any nurses available for Dr. Wondermaker. But Wilma learned very quickly and Mrs. Wondermaker said she really didn't know *what* Doctor would do without her, because she (Mrs. Wondermaker) simply had her hands full with the children.

And there was no end to the shock of the Swanson family when Dr. Wondermaker tried to kiss Wilma one day, in his office. Of course, she

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couldn't stay after that. Dr. Wondermaker insisted it was all a misunderstanding, he regarded Wilma almost as one of his own daughters; but of course, she couldn't stay after that. Fortunately, in addition to the Domestic Science courses at Cataline College, Wilma had studied typing. She couldn't take dictation, but she could type; she had typed all of Dr. Wondermaker's records for him. Wilma got a job in the office of the Dispensary at the Naval Air Station. Mrs. Swanson said that some of the sailor boys were really just lovely, if you got to know them, came from very fine families, really. Besides, Chief Shillitoe worked in that office, and he was a very fine man, really lovely....

At first only Ribacheck showed any interest in the new office girl. The nurses responded to her very openly expressed admiration for nurses, but only Ribacheck (at first) showed any interest in her as a *woman*. Ribacheck belonged notoriously to the Lowest Common Denominator school of venery, and was therefore interested in *all* women *as* women. The other Corpsmen claimed to find a lack of niceness in this. Ribacheck's taste, they said, was All in His Mouth. Of course, Wilma was very polite to all the men, and when Ribacheck smiled at her, she smiled back. In fact, as his smiles grew warmer, she allowed herself to look into his record book in the files. She had never heard of Poynkers Mills, New Jersey, listed as his home town. And, heavens! she couldn't even pronounce his mother's first name. Lutherans were all right, although not perhaps quite so much as Methodists or Presbyterians, but what on earth could a Slovak Lutheran be? Growing more and more dubious, she noted that Ribacheck had once been operated on for a varicocele. Later on she looked up the word in the little Gould's medical dictionary in the office. She blushed, even though the definition was far from explicit enough. Would a varicocele...? Or wouldn't it...? There was, of course, no one she could ask. After that Ribacheck smiled in vain.

And then, one day, Blunt came into the office. Wilma didn't realize it, because she had taken off her glasses to clean them; but she was looking up when he came in, and smiling in his direction. She really *had* lovely gray eyes. After that Blunt came in the office rather often. He was exceedingly shy with women, and found it difficult to talk small talk with them until he knew them well, but Wilma was a bit shy herself.

Blunt, in short, began to court her. Before long, they had an under-

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standing. Mrs. Swanson said that he was really a very lovely person. So quiet, she said. And really, an astonishing knowledge of medicine. After all, a First Class Pharmacist's Mate was almost the same as a civilian doctor, wouldn't you say? Mr. Swanson said that he was one of your steady young fellows. Seemed to know quite a bit about your lumber, too, Mr. Swanson said. Everything was going so smoothly that Blunt overcame his uncertainty as to the propriety of the invitation, and asked Wilma, while they were walking one afternoon near the bungalow he rented in Cataline, if she would care to just look the place over. She said she would.

"I hired the place already furnished," Huey said, leading the way. "Some of the things are real pretty," he said, waving his arm at large. Wilma looked at the pink cloth lampshades with beaded fringes, the heavy red portieres hanging from wooden rings.

"Mmm-hmm," she murmured.

"But this house, like every house, it needs a Woman's Touch," he said. Wilma's heavy cheeks turned a deeper pink.

"Oh, a house *does*, it *does!*" she said fervently.

Huey stopped in front of a closed door. He stood with the key in his hand and half turned to face her.

"Now I'm going to show you something that I haven't ever showed another person here before. You're the very first, Wilma." Her face burned. She looked at the faded and threadbare carpet. She heard the key in the lock and the click of the light switch, and followed his feet inside. She had to take off her glasses and wipe her eyes.

"...and a woman who has, besides, a Scientific Background..."

Putting back her glasses, she saw opposite her a shelf with a row of little bottles, each one containing something like a dried mushroom, only not quite.... With a slight frown of puzzlement she read the neatly typed labels.

Redund.Prep., Cumberback, Alonso T., Steward's Mate 1/c
Redund.Prep., Williamson, Jno., Officer's Cook, 3/c

Lost in pride, Blunt fell silent and looked at his collection. Row after row, shelf after shelf, of bottles and jars, lined the large closet. In cold glass wombs that would forever preserve but never nurture them, floated

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homunculi, in every stage of development up to the sixth month — after that they were always claimed, though burial (Blunt thought) was a foolish waste. Nobody ever asked for an appendix; there must have been over a hundred of them. There were tonsils, tumors, fingers, a few ears, a whole foot, several eyes. Swaying gently in response to distant vibration was something like a bunch of grapes, labeled *Youlihan, Bette Lou.* A shy smile on his lips, Huey reached out and touched with a gentle finger a bottle containing a twelve-foot tapeworm *(Le Maistre, Cleophile).* He rested his hand affectionately on a mason jar that held a scalp of chestnut colored hair. He cleared his throat.

"I don't suppose that there's another collection such as this in the whole country, in private hands," he said, in his high, flat voice. "I was hoping..." He took out a handkerchief, spat onto a corner of it, and rubbed at a speck on a bottle with a rather faded-looking testicle in it.

"I was hoping that after we were married, after that, then I was hoping that you and me could sort of catalogue it all, together, Wilma...

"Wilma?"

He walked rapidly through the bungalow with long strides.

"*Wilma*?"

But Wilma was already on the bus, bound, not for her home, but for the Station. She rode in tight-mouthed containment until the Nurses Quarters, where she allowed herself to be helped off in a state of convulsive hysteria. After being drenched with aromatic spirits of ammonia, and after weeping her dress and those of the nurses tending her into quasi-transparency, she retreated with cold compresses to a darkened room. The nurses, who were fond of her, had watched, like everyone else at Sick Bay, the slow progress of the courtship. It was certainly not to be thought that Blunt, of all people, had made improper advances; they thought that he must have jilted the poor girl; they pressed sympathetically for Details. They got them, and the account of Wilma's Terrible Experiences strained through sobs and hiccups, spread almost at once to Sick Bay; and thence, to the Navy at large, gathering details at every step...

(Pawson, for example, reported to Tester that "Ol' Huey got a closet full o' pickled collions, an' a two-headed baby in a jar o' formaldehyde!")

"But what *I* want to know," said Doctor Wallop, "*is* she marrying him, or — ?"

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Miss Stuart said, "According to her, Not If He's the Very Last Man on Earth."

"'She does not regard herself, nor yet wish to be regarded, in that bony light,'" Dr. Wallop murmured, sneaking his hand onto Miss Stuart's kneecap. Miss Stuart giggled.

Dr. Slide confided to Sam McIntyre that he'd been on the point of suggesting to That Crazy Fool to join the Brethren, but not anymore.

A Bo's'n's Mate named Blascovitch got roaring drunk and hammered at the door of the bungalow one night, demanding his appendix back.

Church and State, appealed to by Mr. Swanson To Do Something, declined to do anything. Chaplain Meyers, with a far-off look in his eye, said something about Samson in the Old Dispensation having made a similar collection. Chief of Police Elsworth Smith didn't know of any law against it.

Blunt himself, vexed at the whole affair, put in for sea duty once more, and Dr. West once more refused to approve. Blunt, he patiently repeated, was Much Too Valuable a Man. Wilma, of course, couldn't stay on after that. It seemed that Huey was doomed once more to wander lonely as a cloud: but instead, he came into his own, at last, as a fully rounded "character"; a fabulous personality who was known to and talked about by everyone on the Station. In a matter of days he became famous in Naval aviation installations all along the coast and in bases in Cuba, the Bahamas, and the West Indies. Eventually his fame became a legend, as it spread in widening circles, until he lost his name and entered mythology. The closet became part of it, too.

"This old Pay Clerk," any sailor you care to name might be saying in a bull session, "was supposed to pay off the whole Ship's Company of this battle wagon in dry dock. Only whiles he was coming aboard he kind of stumbled and the whole suitcase full of money fell open. Well, they pumped that dry dock what I mean *dry*, but they never could find only a *part* of the money. Course, he drew a Court and they retired him, but, funny thing, long about six months later he opened up the biggest damn bar and grill in Honolulu. And everybody was real surprised because he never had the reputation of being a saver. It just goes to show, you never know."

"Reminds me," someone else was sure to say, sooner or later, "of this old Chief Pharmacist's Mate, he — "

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"Oh, yeah! Y' mean the one who — "

"Hey, *you* wanna tell this story?...Well, like I was saying...

"And his wife," the story wound up, "she took off an' never come back; and they say that she never *would* open another closet door again unless someone else was in the room!.... It just goes to show."

But by that time Blunt had been obliged to hire Harold, the Sick Bay porter, as part-time houseman, because no Colored woman in Cataline would enter his bungalow — and indeed, they fled the streets for blocks around when he walked or drove through town.

No one knew when he had started the collection. It may have begun in some mountain cabin filled with screams, or it may not. It could have been prompted by a curiosity that thought to answer mystery by amassing matter; or by a personal idiosyncrasy of no greater depth than one that brings some men to collect stamps, old silver buttons, or used trolley car transfers. Certainly, to Blunt, each item was in its way an *objet d'art*. And certainly he must have been doing it for years without being — oh, not "caught" or "detected" or "discovered": these words imply wrongdoing, and Blunt came as near to anger as anyone ever saw him, when he defended himself.

"People like you," he said to Miss Sweeting, who was trying, in her tortuous way, to express Shock; "People like you Impede the March of Science."

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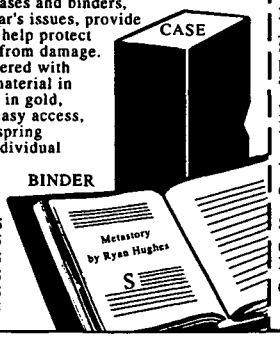

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

A PORTRAIT OF HUMANITY

THE *VOYAGER* spacecraft launched in 1997 recently slipped into interplanetary space beyond Pluto bearing a large phonograph record with images and sounds of Earth: a portrait of humanity.

This is the third column dealing with how a team of artist Jon Lomberg and astronomer Carolyn Porco and I designed a message to fly on NASA's *Cassini* spacecraft, launched in November 1997, bound for Saturn. We wanted to leave a message which would convey something of the people who sent the *Cassini* probe, and why.

Deep space is the best place to leave a long-term message. Probably any message we make will not be read by distant generations, but solely by the generation that launched it. To many, its true purpose is to appeal to and expand the human spirit, now.

Unlike listening for radio signals from extraterrestrials, sending messages inscribed on hard objects to distant worlds implies a vast time scale before any reward. Further, such acts demand that we explore what we should say, not how to fathom what others say.

We wished to send something similar to the *Voyager* spacecraft plaques, yet on a tiny surface, inscribing a photograph into the diamond wafer the size of a coin. Discussions ranged over many choices; I shall try to convey the flavor, often quoting or paraphrasing.

Based on the *Pioneer* and *Voyager* experience, Lomberg drew up a list of requirements that would both deflect the sort of criticism *Pioneer*'s sketch of humans aroused, and minimize confusions among the eventual readers: "The photo must work in black and white and at low-resolution, showing a representative sample of humans with regard

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to age, sex, coloring, ethnic type, body type, dress and hairstyle." This last was to show that hair was natural and variable, yet was not clothing, which would also be deliberately diverse.

Further, the photograph "should show the entire human body, from head to toe, in several different positions" to give an idea of the range of movement. With "a minimum of overlap of detail in the poses, i.e., people not partially obscured by others," all objects would clearly stand out from background, and all individuals have equal visual importance. There would be social implications read into the photo by us and by any future readers, but at least we tried to not send signals we did not intend.

All felt that the picture must represent the planet without being too specific, certainly not a unique site or climate. The background should be information-dense, rich with details about the planet, species, and culture, though without compromising any of the above goals. Among this minutiae should stand out an object identical to something on the spacecraft to provide an unambiguous check of scale.

To stand for all humanity, we felt the photo should be open to humanity's inspection. Early on we agreed that the image should be broadly available. Still, to keep the picture from inappropriate uses, it was copyrighted.

Most of all, the photograph should convey beauty and wonder to our human eyes. We wanted no clinical examination of the human body, but an evocation of ourselves immersed in our world — and *Cassini*, an expression coming out of that passion.

Since we had discussed these ideas while walking in my home town, Laguna Beach, we immediately thought of an ocean setting. Lomberg lives on the big island of Hawaii, where isolated sandy beaches boast steady conditions for photography. With submerged lava rocks and waves rolling in, clouds in the sky, flapping birds and possibly a waning gibbous moon, we could convey much to a single glance from alien eyes. The beach should not be well known or easily identified; we wanted a generic beach that could be found on most continents or islands of Earth. Beaches have strong mythic and biological associations that enhance their relevance.

The photographer Lomberg knew best and wanted to work with was Simon Bell of Toronto. Bell is one of the world's best stereo pho-

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tographers and kept the team from error many times. For his convenience, Lomberg and Porco considered a lake beach shot on the sandy shores of Lake Ontario. In the end this idea lost out. A lake does not impart the same feel as the ocean; waves are smaller and typically the coast is less varied.

Some facets we sought to convey more subtly: "the use and role of boats; the importance of water; the nurturing of children; information about the water-cycle and thus the approximate temperature." Cast shadows might imply the latitude or time of day, but for distant eyes that would be difficult.

We see the world in stereo, and a direct way to convey this would be to etch two stereo views of the same scene. This would also strongly hint that the curious bipeds in the photo saw with the odd symmetric spots on their upper heads. The disk's size serves to fix uniquely the distance between the "eyes" of the stereo views, so that images at all distances align properly. The camera separation for the shots was close to our own eye separation, again suggesting that's what our eyes are for.

The one object from the spacecraft we knew future viewers would have was, of course, the disk. One of the photographed adults should then hold the diamond disk, very clearly outlined against a background. To help alien perceptions, all or most of the people should be looking at it.

Porco reminded us of the *Pioneer* drawing, which to some implied a man was larger and thus more important than a woman. Never mind that the *Pioneer* team carefully used figures with the average height of men and women worldwide, they drew objections. Porco insisted that we should make a woman the focal point of the photograph, and Lomberg agreed. When finished, the photo provoked one woman to comment, "It'll tell them in the far future that Earth is a matriarchy. I love it!"

In the photo the central, seated woman holds the disk (actually, we didn't risk using the diamond, so substituted a plexiglass stand-in with the same optical reflecting characteristics). Others look at it. Its diameter sets the scale of the people and plants within view.

We agreed that while the adults and older child should be clothed, to avoid the *Pioneer* criticism, the younger children might be nude, to hint at how we reproduce. Casual, loose, and solid-colored, clothing should be shot to make it as easy as

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possible to see that it is a covering, and not a growth of the body. Women should be wearing little makeup, if any. Some small jewelry like rings or bracelets might be all right, if it were obviously artificial. No cross or other religious symbols, though; no favoritism should be implied.

Some people we spoke with thought it dubious to not show all people nude, for clarity. But many would object to or be embarrassed by pictures of naked adults. Lomberg carried the day by saying firmly, "If we want this photo to truly be representative of all the Earth, it is no small matter to alienate a large portion of the Earthly audience."

Also, Lomberg noted, people hardly ever walk around naked. In most cultures there is some sort of dress, a fundamental social fact about us. Shadows on the ground and a sun hat could give the very important information that we cover ourselves for protection from the environment. Astute observers might even draw some conclusions about avoiding too much solar ultraviolet at the beach.

As well, sexual differentiation will be guessable purely by obvious body shape differences and the breasts of the women. (But would non-mammals guess their use?) If these hints proved insufficient, the genitals would not provide strong clues as to their function. Necessarily there would be unseen parts of the body — soles of the feet, inside of the mouth — so we could not be utterly clinically representative.

After all, the picture was not aiming to explain human biology or reproduction fully, but to satisfy the simple question: What did the creators of this message look like?

The background could explain larger aspects. A shot angled along the beach would show incoming wave trains clearly. Ironwood conifers along the shore would include another great kingdom of life; the bacteria we would have to do without.

A collection of several different boats — wooden canoe, modern sailboat, fishing boat with motor — might suggest our range of technology and our interest in traveling and vehicles, of which *Cassini* is one of the ultimate expressions. But more than one would clutter the composition, too. Sail size and mast height the viewers could use to roughly estimate our wind speeds and atmospheric density.

Birds in the sky would bring in another animal life form, but how

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could we count on them? A trained parrot balanced on a limb? This proved difficult to bring about during the long, grueling photo sessions. And a sitting bird would not imply flight. Luck would have to give us that, then, from the myriad shots necessary to get just the right one.

The time of day was another variable, but we could not see how to use it to carry much information. The sun's angle should be low enough to cast clear shadows but not so low as to cause problems with exposure times. The fidelity of the process which would inscribe the photo also set limits. In low-resolution black and white with little dynamic range, our main goal was clarity and clear outlines of objects, though stereo images and foregrounding important objects would help in sorting it all out, we hoped.

Naturally, we thought of the most dramatic possible shot, a sunset over the ocean. But Simon Bell shook his head. "Using flash may not work. Because I use two cameras, I have to slow the shutter speed to ensure that the flash is caught by both cameras. This would then affect the look off the waves, which we'd ideally want to freeze with a fast shutter speed."

Sunset also drastically reduces potential shooting times and locations and might compromise esthetics, since a good sunset looks best when the sky and foreground are underexposed, while skin tones look best when normally exposed. Using too much fill light to compensate could look artificial, too.

Myriad such considerations entered in the final, four-day-long photo session, at two different beaches. The logistics proved almost military in scope, down to camping gear, food supplies, and a portable toilet. Lomberg organized all this, selected the sites and found the multi-racial models, all residents of Kona. Simon Bell flew in from Toronto, after trying model poses in his studio, and shot over 1200 slides.

Some had full frontal nudity, others were unclothed but more discreet. Some were fully clothed, as a hedge against NASA's suddenly balking at the last minute. Porco took the final candidate slides to Washington and showed them to NASA Administrator Dan Goldin, who approved the final selection. As luck would have it, the best shots had no birds flapping in the deep blue sky.

Now came time to assemble all this into a final design.

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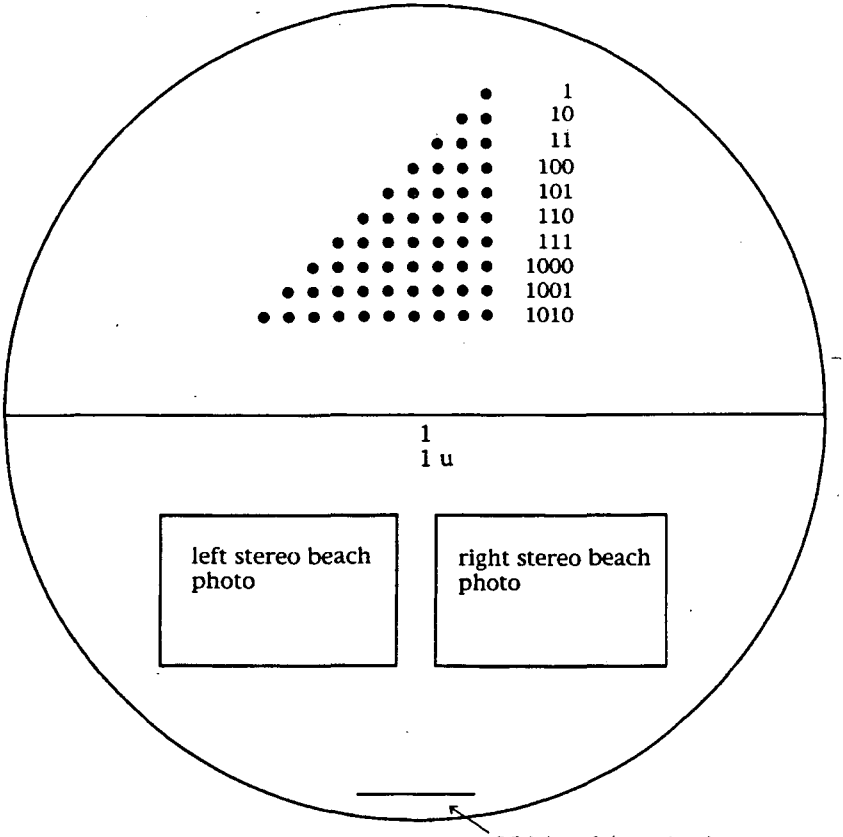
We planned to inscribe the reverse of the diamond with a straight line across the diameter, broken in the middle to show a "1u" symbol. The "u" stood for "unit" and was repeated elsewhere to show we were thinking of lengths.

Given sufficient dynamic range, the refractive characteristics of the diamond might be measurable in the photo. This might be used by readers to reconstruct some of the color. Bell doubted that our 64 gray levels would be up to this, though.

Above the "1u" line we depicted the first ten digits in binary code, then used binary everywhere



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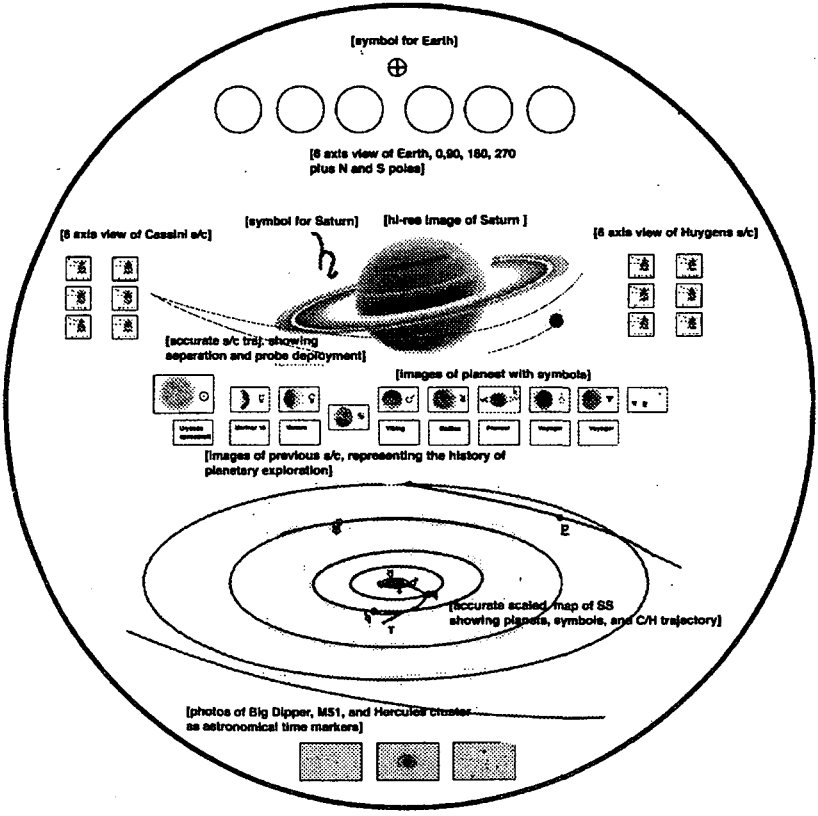
else. In a sense the reverse side sets the terms of discussion: the photo says "Here is who we are," while the units tell them how we shall describe our world on the front side. Only the names of supporting laboratories and organizations at the very bottom carries any Kilroy aspect.

From top to bottom the scale goes from large to smaller. This echoes the view across a plane, with the bigger scale of the horizon higher in the field of view. So also on the front side, with the Big Dipper, M71 and the Hercules cluster at the bottom and the Earth at the top.

Above the stellar pictures is an accurate, scaled map of the solar system, showing planets, symbols for them, and the *Cassini-Huygens* trajectory through them, establish-


[symbol for Earth]
[6 axis view of Earth, 0,90, 180, 270 plus N and S poles]
[6 axis view of Cassini s/c]
[symbol for Saturn]
[hi-res image of Saturn]
[6 axis view of Huygens s/c]
[accurate s/c traj. showing separation and probe deployment]
[images of planest with symbols]
[images of previous s/c, representing the history of planetary exploration]
[accurate scaled map of SS showing planets, symbols, and C/H trajectory]
[photos of Big Dipper, M51, and Hercules cluster as astronomical time markers]

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ing our home. Above this is a gallery of previous spacecraft such as *Viking, Pioneer,* and *Voyager.* (This actually violated the larger-to-smaller scheme, alas, but seemed necessary to tie the idea of such vessels to the planets they explored, shown in a matching gallery of planet photos directly above each spacecraft. Only Earth has no craft, suggesting that we live there.)

Above this gallery is a highly detailed Saturn with its planetary symbol. An accurate trajectory marks the *Cassini* orbiter separation from the *Huygens* probe. To the left is a six-axis view of the Orbiter, to the right of *Huygens.* Above this row are Earth photographs, four of ninety-degree rotations and two of the poles. Tom Van Sandt of the Geosphere Corporation generously gave us cloud-free, consistent lighting maps. From these we hoped continental drift dating could be done.

Many compromises lie behind these views. Could eyes in the far future translate the slanted perspective of the solar system diagram into a three-dimensional reality? We could but hope.

These were the plans as of January, 1997. Throughout 1994-7 the issue of how to write on diamond was a continuing technical puzzle. The final method adopted was etching by an oxygen and sand plasma. Oxygen etches all carbon-based materials, but optimizing this process demands much experience.

My doctorate was in solid state physics, so I was the natural person to deal with such issues. Quickly I learned how little I knew of technological advances in the last two decades; I was woefully out of date. We swiftly fell back on real experts, and got excellent technical support from many.

Public exposure had already begun well before this work. One day in early February, 1995, my telephone rang, announcing a leak. The British popular magazine *New Scientist* wanted to run a piece on the plans. Apparently they had sniffed out rumors from the European Space Agency. I guardedly confirmed what they already knew and corrected some errors. Immediately after hanging up I e-mailed Porco, Lomberg, and JPL. Porco seemed panicked, but I saw little harm. After all, the local newspaper (the *Orange County Register*) had also carried an extensive piece later in February 1995, based upon a reporter sitting in on our discussions at UCI. It provoked no follow-up journalism, and neither did the *New*

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Scientist piece. Porco asked me to write *New Scientist* to correct their omission of her name, a request which seemed at odds with her anxieties about keeping a low profile. Still, I thought little of it. *New Scientist* published my letter, and a further note from Porco as well, establishing credit.

Coincidentally, a paper I had co-authored on wormholes was getting enormous press coverage, appearing in over a hundred newspapers; it was a wild idea and counted among its authors sf writers Robert Forward, Geoff Landis, and John Cramer. The diamond marker drew surprisingly little interest. Wild ideas play well in the press, but we expected as launch date approached the disk would get some mention.

Porco was much exercised about the *New Scientist* story. I reasoned that perhaps she was echoing NASA's extreme concern that nothing about a marker be made public before it was a done deal. The *Pioneer* plaque had provoked criticism, ranging from those perturbed by depicting nude humans to feminists who disliked its showing a woman shorter than a man, and in a different posture (less upright). In retrospect, the photograph eventually shot to go on the marker inevitably would have piqued some, since it showed a rather politically correct grouping of all races, with a woman as the centerpiece.

Porco and Lomberg worked through the principal remaining tasks: sharpening the concepts, detailed drawing of the disk etch pattern, and walking the diamond disks through the etching process. These first two fell to Lomberg, consuming many months of tedious labor. Porco handled most of the etching.

Meanwhile, NASA was pondering our efforts. As with *Voyager*, our design team operated on its own, with minimal engagement of the busy engineers. However, Charles Kohlhase, Manager for Science and Mission Design of the Cassini Program at JPL, decided that any marker or disk should carry no commercial insignia and issued a general directive stating so.

At about this time we heard that the JPL Cassini group had begun to create their own marker. Previous missions all the way back to the Mars Viking lander, and perhaps even earlier, had carried the names of principal engineers, etched onto metal strips. Why not expand this idea and include the public?

With little time to spare, this Kilroy Was Here gesture could attract attention, public involvement, more hits at the Cassini web site.

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The Planetary Society joined in. Anyone who wanted their name to fly to Saturn had only to mail in a signed postcard. Signatures were cut out and scanned by the Planetary Society, then digitized and loaded onto a compact disk. After a national campaign roping in congressmen and canvassers, the grand result was 616,403 signatures on the carrier—named, in high bureaucratic style-deaf fashion, the Digitized Versatile Disk.

My congressman, Christopher Cox, sent all his constituents a letter promising to funnel their names through his office and onto the Cassini spacecraft: "Your name will live on in space long after your grandchildren, and theirs, and theirs." They obtained some celebrity signatures from *Star Trek* actors and congressmen, baby footprints, and pet paw prints.

The European collaborators got wind of all this and started their own signature collection. They took the signature disk a step further and planned to sell a duplicate disk after the launch, reasoning that people who were to be immortalized on the interplanetary scale would, of course, want a copy. Like JPL, they set up a world wide web site to send names and messages. They got such memorable phrases as "Hello green worms," "HELP" and "Don't cry because you cannot see the sun, because the tears will stop you seeing the stars."

The Europeans never managed to get their hundred thousand signatures transmitted to JPL in time, so those are not on the Orbiter. Therefore the European Space Agency attached their own disk to the *Huygens* lander, while JPL's names fly on the Orbiter. The JPL team was uneasy about lack of screening of the ESA names and the Europeans' plans to sell their disk commercially.

All this activity to collect a meaningless string of names and salutations emulates the portion of the *Voyager* record of least value, the list of Congressional committee members that NASA forced the *Voyager* team to include.

Cassini's compact disk surely will not survive for more than a century or so, nor could it be easily read in any distant future. Even very clever humans or aliens could not figure out the encoding software from first principles, and should they, they would get only a list of indecipherable, disorganized names, and a few cryptic, disconnected messages in this sea of words.

One could imagine a far future

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discoverer wondering what to think of a species that created a message without attempting to make it "comprehensible, self-extracting, anti-coded, triply redundant, and graduated in content," as Lomberg summed up the *Voyager* and diamond disk approach. As a projection of pure vanity it resembles the International Star Registry, which sells people certificates stating that stars have been named for them. Such meaningless exercises in ego tell more about our species than we might like revealed.

This Kilroy disk emerged only after the diamond marker idea became known. It had every sign of a hastily designed public relations stunt. Including long lists of names is a cliché of time capsules. Apparently the largest collection was the 22 million assembled and buried at the order of President Ford for the bicentennial celebration in 1976.

As Kohlhase put it to me, knowing that I looked askance at the signature disk, he and others devoted eighteen months of hard work to produce a "heart-based signature disk," in contrast to the "mind-based diamond."

Of course, both gestures spring from a common impulse: to give people a sense of connection with something larger than themselves. To value this is to rank the expressive quality of deep time messages over their communicating ability.

My trouble with all such name-gathering was that the end result more nearly resembled the graffiti which disfigure many ancient monuments. After all, the scribblers upon the Parthenon no doubt felt some burst of elation, too, but the end result besmirched the work which is the point of it all.

Lomberg regretted that the signature disk would get commingled in the public mind with the actual message marker, vastly increasing the ratio of noise to signal, as engineers put it. Indeed, the Planetary Society has now made this a feature of their membership drives; in 1997 they attached a microchip to the Stardust mission to rendezvous with a comet. "And you'll be a part of it all," an advertisement promised.

We can expect that such masses of names will become a standard fixture of a publicity-conscious space program. Indeed, shouting at the stars will become commonplace. In 1998 the Sci-Fi Channel tried to arrange transmission of signature messages by radio beamed skyward. An entrepreneur tried to sell space on metal plates to be launched to the stars. None seems

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to have even thought about how utterly distinct life forms could say something understandable to each other.

So matters rushed on, as the launch deadline neared: October, 1997. *Cassini* did lift off in November after several delays. In those last months much more happened, as I shall treat in a forthcoming book, *Deep Time*. The saga of sending messages into the high vault of vacuum is a continuing tale of human frailty and ego.

But it means something that we modern humans try. Our signals across the stretching spans of centuries may convey little, but they do mean this: something deeply human wishes to connect with those who come after us. We yearn, across both space and time, for the eternal.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu

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Can it really be that Adam-Troy Castro's last appearance here was his novella "The Funeral March of the Marionettes" in July of 1997? So it is. Well, Mr. Castro has been busy with some longer projects, including a forthcoming Spiderman novel, The Gathering of the Sinister Six, *and collaboraing with Tom Defalco on a Spiderman/X-Men novel entitled* Time's Arrows Book 2: The Present. *Fortunately, his immersion in the world of comic-book heroes hasn't affected his way of viewing the world, as this new story demonstrates. Remember: when General MacArthur said that "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away," he was speaking of mere mortals...*

Crisis on Ward H!

By Adam-Troy Castro

WE WERE HAVING A PRETTY quiet day until the Olympian marched in to ruin things. Jetstream and Plasmo were over at the card table to swap the same old boring war stories they told each other every morning; Anvil-Man was copping some z's, his dog-eared issue of *Superwoman* lying centerfold-side down on his thick plaster body cast; Enchanter was staring at the wall, mumbling to himself, making the wallpaper do tricks for him; Jukebox, formerly Mento, was starting in on the first few lines of "Under The Boardwalk," and The Crime-Stomper, pinioned upside down in his traction bed, was watching Rush Limbaugh on a black-and-white TV set staring up at him from the tile floor.

As for me, I was in bed reading. I've never been much of a reader (thanks to the mugger that killed my parents when I was five, I've never been much of anything except an Obsessed Creature of the Night) but the last four years on Ward H had been so stultifying that I'd given some thought to writing down my life story, just for the sake of having something to do. Not being overly familiar with the genre, I was plowing

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through every other cape memoir I could get my hands on just to see how the damned things were written. So far I'd read *Your Worst Nightmare, Punk*, by the Noose, *American Way* by Flagman, and *Obnoxious for Justice*, by Major Butthead. They were no help at all, because apparently all you had to do to write a cape memoir was lie through your teeth about all the battles you lost in real life. And I couldn't do that because I'd sworn to always fight for truth. At least the one I was reading now, *Secret Identity*, had curiosity value to recommend it: I'd known Muscleman for years, back when we were in the Liberty Squad together, and after his big change I'd always secretly wanted to know the story behind his decision to get the operation that changed him to Warrior Woman.

Anyway, I was well into chapter seven — the one describing how saving Manhattan from the death ray of Dr. Fiendish had persuaded him he needed to get in touch with his soft, nurturing side — when I heard the moans ripple through the room. The Crime-Stomper muttered a bad word, Jukebox started singing Tom Petty's "Learning to Fly," and Jetstream, who had a talent for belaboring the obvious, said, "Cripes, it's him."

It was. The Olympian. The super-fast, super-strong, invulnerable, three-tons-of-solid-muscle, square-jawed, internationally overexposed last survivor of the planet Mekton himself. The great big boy scout who was more powerful than the next hundred heroes all put together, and lived only for chances to show it. I have a contact on the Amazon Aces who says it's all overcompensation for being hung like a thimble. He was standing in the doorway, looking huge and heroic and mythic and huge, his titanium-blue hair glistening in the light of the open window, his little curl carefully pasted to his forehead, his great square jaw set in the determined grimace that his admirers think of as heroic and those of us who've teamed up with him prefer to consider constipated. As he surveyed the ward, hands on hips, as if waiting for somebody to sculpt him, I said, "Hey, Limpy! Save any stray cats from trees lately?"

His monolithic head swiveled on its sequoia neck. He focused on me. "Night Rat," he said. As I winced with the knowledge that I'd have to talk to him now, he lumbered over and thrust out his great meaty hand. "I did not know you were in here."

"Yeah. Right. Sure you didn't." I shook his hand anyway. Who the hell needs the Strongest Man on Earth for an enemy?

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He gave me the once-over with his famous Diagnostic Vision. "I see no physical damage. What happened to you?"

"I ran into this costumed bad guy called Nervous Rex. Tried to poison the city reservoir with a drug that causes permanent neural damage in its victims. I managed to take him out before he dosed the water, but not before he hit me with a dart dipped in the stuff. I'm fine most days. Other days..." I shrugged. "Let's just say it's hard to fight a never-ending battle when you're quivering on the sidewalk. What about you? Why are you here? Is this a photo-op? You got some TV crew waiting outside to take pictures of you visiting the disabled veterans of super wars?"

He blinked. Twice. Absorbed the question. "I brought in a new patient. They'll be wheeling him in any minute."

That broiled my bottom. The Heroic Veteran's Administration was supposed to have regulations about the number of patients allotted to a ward. We were already past that limit, if you counted Enchanter, which we really couldn't, since he uncontrollably faded in and out of existence anyway. But a new patient would definitely put us over. I was about to complain when Plasmo stumbled on over, his semiliquid legs bunching up around his ankles like baggy pajamas. Somewhere in his half-melted features sat the eager expression of a lonely man happy for somebody new to talk to. "Olympian!" He said. "Remember me? We took out Dr. Fiendith together?"

"I remember," the Olympian said, in a voice that showed no trace of nostalgia.

Plasmo's neck elongated twenty feet, whipped his head back over his shoulders, and extended the entire length of the room, just so he could face Jetstream from a distance of six inches and shout, "HA! TOLD YOU!" Then his neck pulled taut, yanking his head back to its previous position atop his misshapen shoulders, so he could use it to beam self-satisfaction at the Olympian. "I keep telling him you and I are partnerth, but he doethn't believe me. But you can tell him. Remember? Fiendith had you helpleth under a paralythith beam? I burtht in and heroically pulled the plug? You gave me that thpethial patch to thew on my cothtume, that thaid I wath your offithial partner from that moment on? Remember? Huh?"

"Yes," said the Olympian. "It was a special moment. I think about it often."

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The exchange so thoroughly nauseated me I had to turn away to avoid throwing up. That was nothing new with Plasmo, of course; I don't know about you, but there's something about stretching powers that's always made me physically ill. Sue me. It's worse in Plasmo's case, since he's worn out all his connective tissues and can't quite snap back all the way anymore.

Still, that wasn't what made me sick so much as the constant brown-nosing the Olympian seems to get from so many people in our profession. Like the way they call him Earth's Greatest Hero even though he's not from Earth. The way they call him a hero at all when a man who can survive ground-zero nukes isn't really putting his butt on the line in any way. And the way they simper like starstruck teenage girls whenever he offers them even the slightest sign of recognition. Take that stupid patch Plasmo was so excited about. I have one too. So does everybody. The Olympian has them made in bulk. "Anyway," I said, just to change the subject back to something relevant. "Who's this new roomie you're bringing us? Somebody who's paid his dues, I hope?"

"Who didn't vote for Clinton!" The Crime-Stomper shouted, from his inverted position on the traction bed, thus prompting Jetstream, a lifelong Democrat, to hobble over in the buckets of burn-gel he uses for shoes and change the channel from Limbaugh to Oprah.

The Olympian had always been opaque to irony. "I don't think he's a great believer in democracy."

Two orderlies chose that moment to wheel in the new patient on his life-support bed. Plasmo gasped — nothing new, since he goes through spells where he has to hyperventilate to keep his lungs from deflating. The Crime-Stomper cursed, and appealed to the spirit of America itself to heal him so he could leap across the room and throttle the new arrival with his bare hands. Jetstream said, "Jumping Jehosophat!," his pet exclamation, which to me always sounded stupid. Anvil-Man woke blinking, a disquieted frown forming on his bland complacent features. Enchanter shouted a series of nonsense words, summoning forth a flock of winged pigs that instantly flew out the open window. And Jukebox, formerly Mento, started singing "Behind Blue Eyes," starting with the famous first line about how nobody knows what it's like to be the Bad Man. Of all of us, only I remained capable of putting our horror into rational words, as

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I leaped to my feet: "H-hey! This a hero's ward! You can't bring him in here! He's a villain!"

"And not jutht any villain," Plasmo slurred. "THE villain. Baron Death himthelf!"

Temporarily forgetting where he was and what shape he was in, Anvil-Man tried to leap out of bed. Bad move — his bones were still knitting. Even constrained as he was, it had to hurt. He aaarrrrghed.

I approached the new arrival gingerly, hoping the others would blame my quivering gait on my long-standing nerve condition. Maybe that was affecting me, a little. But there was also fear: Baron Death had spent the last thirty years waging constant war on the combined forces of everything that was good and decent. Just about every hero I knew had run afoul of his evil schemes one time or another, and we all considered ourselves fortunate to have escaped with our lives. The combined forces of all Earth's champions had just barely managed to keep his threat at bay; up until now, even the Olympian himself — the guy who'd once worked out a kink in his back by spending the afternoon moving the entire Himalayan mountain chain one yard to the left — had never succeeded in capturing him. The Baron looked pretty irrevocably defeated now; his trademark shiny black armor had been crumpled like aluminum foil around the human form inside, leaving him not only helpless, but trapped in there, alone with the memories of his great evil, forever. Life-support tubes pierced his skin through the chinks; the fluids passing both ways bubbled unpleasantly as the orderlies wheeled the bed into the empty spot by the front door.

I whirled and approached the Olympian. "All right, so I'm fairly impressed you caught him. How could I not be? But this is still a hero's ward! There's no place for his kind in here!"

"That's right!" shouted The Crime-Stomper. "You want a place to put him, try the bottom of the ocean!"

"Or the far side of the moon!" added Jetstream, perhaps the only time in living memory that the two of them had ever agreed with each other.

"Or the thurfathe of the thun!" Plasmo said, probably just happy to contribute in some way.

The Olympian was indomitable. "The jail ward isn't equipped to give him the kind of care he needs. The usual facilities for super-villains are

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filled with people who'd give their right arms to break him out. He's never actually been convicted of a crime. I have no choice but to leave him here. The Disabled Heroes Administration has already given its approval. With any luck, you'll all be a good influence on him."

"'...good...' — hey, listen, you! Come back here!"

But he was already gone, having leaped out the window in a single bound.

"Bastard!" The Crime-Stomper shouted.

"He'th gone," Plasmo informed him.

"Hell, I know that! But he's the Olympian! He's got super-hearing! He can still hear us cussing him out! AIN'T THAT RIGHT, LIMPY? YOU ALIEN...TURD! WE ALL KNOW YOU'RE THAT NERDY REPORTER! WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT, HANNNH?"

That brought Nurse Kent running in from the hall. She was a tough old bird, built like a fortress of solitude, and about as kindly as an evil henchman whose paycheck's been shorted for the week. She planted her mallet-shaped fists on her great broad hips and demanded: "What's all this noise?"

"Nothing, ma'am," Jetstream said. "Night Rat's just blowing off some steam."

She tsked. And it was a powerful tsk, too; if tsking can be a super-power, bestowed by a bite from a radioactive grandmother or something, Nurse Kent was the most formidable tsker of them all. When she tsked, the disapproval just radiated off of her in waves, capable of dousing all life from a room. She waggled a long bony finger at the tip of my nose and said: "Now, you know better than that, young man. You boys need your rest. I don't want any Titans Clashing in here."

"Sorry," I said, my eyes downcast. "It was just my soul, crying out for justice."

"And you know that's not good for you. You don't want to bring on one of your episodes, do you?"

"No, Ma'am."

"That's better," she said. She looked at the others. "Does anybody need a bedpan?"

"I'll take one," said Anvil-Man.

She obliged, waited while he did what he had to do, gave us all stern looks, and waddled back out.

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It was Jetstream who broke the silence she always left behind her. "That'll do it, Night Rat." He made a disparaging gesture of his flame-dampening gloves. "Thanks."

"You think this is some kind of joke?" I said, sotto voce. "That's Baron forgodsake Death in that bed, mister!"

"That's right!" Crime-Stomper cried. "I say we finish him off right now! Do the world a favor!"

That was par for the course. The Crime-Stomper's idea of fighting crime had been leaping through a plate glass window firing Uzis with both hands. His body count was supposed to be in the low thousands. Some of them even guilty. He became the Quad he is today the first time he met somebody who could shoot back. I said, "You know I won't be a party to that. I never approved of killing."

"I know. And that's why the same bad guys you fought on Wednesday always escaped from prison on Thursday and had to be put away again on Friday. Pointless, wasn't it?"

Jetstream, whose rogue's gallery had consisted of the same six costumed villains, all of whom went on crime sprees with the same depressing regularity as mine, said, "And ethics? Morality? Doesn't that mean anything to you, you reactionary butthead?"

"Come closer and say that, you sorry excuse for a fizzed-out Roman candle. I'll bite your nose off."

Jukebox started singing, "Turn, Turn, Turn."

Enchanter tried to levitate, but bumped his head on the ceiling with a painful thwock that only Anvil-Man appreciated.

Jetstream said, "It doesn't matter anyway. None of us are really up to trim these days. And he is wearing that armor of his. I don't think there's any way we could kill him even if we wanted to."

Anvil-Man said, "Well, I have a suggestion."

Nobody asked to hear it. We knew what his suggestion was. The only trick in his reportoire was crushing bad guys with anvils from six stories up — thus earning him his famous nickname, "The Man With the Drop on Crime." He'd accidentally leaned out too far over the edge of a roof one day, compounded the error by not letting go of his anvil when he had a chance, and as a result had ridden his trademark weapon all the way to the pavement. Unlike most of us, he'd be out of here eventually; he'd just

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broken every bone in his body. The anvil in question was now a counterweight providing tension for his elevated leg. Since he couldn't turn his head, he had to stare at that anvil every single waking hour of the day. Yeah, we knew what his suggestion was, all right. I said, "We'll keep that in mind," and, more to escape the debate than anything else, joined Plasmo at Baron Death's bedside.

Plasmo glanced at me sheepishly, the oddest expression on the runny muck that passed for his face. "Peatheful," he said, "ithn't he?"

I looked down at the fiend who'd once locked me in a room with five hunter-seeker robots. "Yeah," I said. "Peaceful."

Which bothered me, a little. The Baron Death I remembered had always been a pompous ass—he'd capture you, chain you to a wall in some dungeon somewhere, and rather than just let you rot there the way you'd expect a villain of his intelligence to handle it, he'd put all his operations on hold so he could pace back and forth in front of you speechifying about all his nefarious plans. Muscleman used to say that the only reason the Baron never actually went ahead and conquered the damn planet was that he knew he wouldn't have any nefarious plans left to brag about once he did. Evil as he was, basically the only thing he really cared about was talking.

I waved my hand in front of his eyeslits. He didn't blink.

"Really," Anvil-Man said. "I bet you, dollars to donuts, a good sock in the head with an anvil would get past that helmet of his in a New York minute."

"How would you know?" Crime-Stomper said sourly.

"The same way everybody knows. I fought him once."

Plasmo and I whirled, to face a room suddenly drowning in stunned silence. Even Jukebox was agape. We met each other's eyes, saw the shock and disbelief there, and without saying a word came to the mutual conclusion that this was the single most unbelievable thing anybody had said all day. Ergo, we knew it was true. Crime-Stomper gave our incredulity a voice: "You? YOU...of all people...YOU fought Baron Death?"

"Yes," Anvil-Man mimicked, "Me, of all people, I fought Baron Death. What's so hard to believe about that? You don't think I could have been a match for him?"

Enchanter turned inside-out and peered at us from in between his own teeth. The rest of us knew exactly how he felt.

"I think we all need to hear this story," Jetstream said.

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But Anvil-Man's feelings were hurt, now. "No. To hell with you guys. I'm going back to sleep."

"Anvil-Man..." I began.

He started humming loudly, so we'd know his withdrawal was official. That set off Jukebox, this time on "Sympathy for the Devil." Enchanter became a toy truck, then a steam engine, then a unicorn. Plasmo and I looked at each other, rolled our eyes, and turned back to the armored figure on the life-support bed.

I don't know. If it were the old Baron Death lying battered and broken, but shouting his usual brand of megalomaniacal defiance, I think I would have sided with Crime-Stomper. But this Baron Death didn't speak, didn't utter a sound, didn't give any indication that there was anything inside his crumpled armor but an equally empty shell of flesh. It was impossible to keep thinking of him as an enemy. But it was also impossible to forget what it had been like to endure his taunts while trying to escape his booby-trapped Maze of Death. I turned to Plasmo, and saw the same troubled look in his eyes. "Do you think he's...all there?"

"He'th Baron Death," Plasmo said simply. "He'th ethcaped from thertain doom a thouthand timeth. It doethn't make any thenthe for him to end hith dayth here."

"So you think this is just some plot of his?"

"I hope tho," Plasmo said.

"Why?"

"Becauthe I think he dethervthe better."

And damned if I didn't agree with that. Because now that I thought of it, Baron Death had been one of the most honorable bad guys I've ever encountered. He'd attack you soon as look at you, of course — that much was a given; in his profession, he could hardly be expected to do any less — but for all his supposed brilliance, for all the hard times he'd given people like me and Crime-Stomper and Plasmo and the Olympian over the years, he played the game by the rules.

Whatever could he have done, to make a big blue boy scout like the Olympian want to reduce him to...this?

Deeply troubled now, I leaned in close. "Baron Death? You there?"

Somewhere deep within his armor, the arch-villain murmured incoherently.

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I leaned in closer. "Come on, Baron. Say something."

He mumbled some more. But it wasn't just meaningless gibberish — though it could have translated to anything, it was also definitely spoken from some deep well of anguished desperation.

Only one word emerged clearly, and that one hit the room with the force of a thunderbolt: "...danger..."

It sounded nothing like Baron Death's usual voice.

Crime-Stomper called from his bed: "I don't like the sound of that."

"Me either," I said. I turned back to Baron Death. "What kind of danger? Tell me!"

The Baron's eyes rolled. "D-dangerous....danger..."

Dangerous danger. The worst kind.

I gritted my teeth. "Something's terribly wrong here."

Plasmo nodded, his head bobbing from side to side atop an obscenely suggestive five-foot neck. "I wath thtarting to get that imprethion mythelf."

"I agree," said the Enchanter, and that really cinched it, since as far as we knew he hadn't spoken a coherent word since his epic battle with N'loghthl, Lord of Phlarrrrg, five years earlier.

We looked at Baron Death again, then looked at each other, then at the others, and finally, together, turned toward Jukebox.

Once, he'd been Mento, The Smartest Man on Earth, and I guess the name fit, even if it made him sound like a breath mint. For the five years he ran around in that ugly pink jumpsuit of his (the one with the picture of a brain framed in an oval on his chest) nobody had ever succeeded in defeating him in a battle of wits. And any number of criminals tried, not only devising ridiculously elaborate crimes but actually (and I still can't believe how STUPID this is) sending him CLUES about where they were going to strike next. You would think that when Mento was finally defeated, it would be at the hands of somebody who was even more brilliant than he was. But it hadn't happened that way — he'd met a bad guy who was DUMBER. A trucker named Earl, who was busting up a bar because his girlfriend had just left him. Who, being too drunk and stupid to think up any highly intricate deathtrap for Mento to cleverly escape from, just whopped him over the head with a bar stool, thus instantly turning The Smartest Man on Earth into the human oldies marathon he's been ever since.

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Jukebox noticed us watching him and immediately segued into "Every Breath You Take."

Plasmo and I glanced at each other, and between us decided that it couldn't hurt. We left Baron Death behind and sat down by Jukebox's bed, one of us on either side.

He started singing "Go Away, Little Girl."

Plasmo's arm slithered up and around the back of Jukebox's head and wrapped itself around his mouth, effectively gagging him.

"Thank you," I told Plasmo.

"My pleathure."

I faced Jukebox again. "Listen. You've seen what's going on here. You know it's important. You know that something about it stinks on ice. You know that if there's something bad going down here, then we're probably the only people in position to do anything about it. Finally, you know that this might be the last chance most of us have to make a difference in this world again. But alone, we might not be able to figure it out in time. Everything depends on you being able to fight your way out of wherever it is you've been the last few years and give us some kind of advice that makes sense. You understand?"

Was it just wishful thinking, or were his eyes regaining some of their previous focus? I gestured for Plasmo to release him. Plasmo did — and for just a second Jukebox actually looked like he was trying to say something. He opened his mouth, closed it, swallowed, made a choking noise, then opened his mouth.

And once again started singing.

This time in a deep, throaty hard-rock voice. Something about holding a girl in his arms while the band played.

"Damn," I said.

"Brooth," said Plasmo.

"What?"

"Brooth," he repeated. When I failed to understand that, he amplified, "The Bawth." When I failed to understand that too, he gave an exasperated look and spelled it out for me: "Brooth Thpringthteen."

"Great. You can name that tune. Big hairy deal."

"No! I'm thaying I know thith thong! I have the thee-dee. It'th called 'Brilliant Dithguithe!'"

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Jukebox cut off the song in mid-lyric. Blinked at us.

And with a visibly tremendous effort, somehow managed to avoid singing again.

Brilliant Disguise. Interesting. I clapped him on the shoulder. "You done good, Ju—I mean, Mento. We'll get back to you."

He nodded, his eyes glistening.

Jetstream had wandered over in the interim, his flame-retardant buckets scraping metallically against the cold tile floor. "What's it mean?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "But think on this: it doesn't make sense for the man in that armor to be the real Baron Death. He's the Elvis of bad guys; if it was really the Baron, they wouldn't just dump him in some hole-in-the-wall ward to rot, for his people to eventually swoop down and rescue. No matter what the Olympian said. They'd bury him in the deepest hole they could find, build an army base around it, and have the entire membership of the Niceness League, the Terrific Ten, and the Good Eggs guarding him twenty-four hours a day. He can't be Baron Death. And that means — terrifying as it might be to admit this — that the man who brought him in couldn't have been the real Olympian."

"Jumping Jehosophat!" Jetstream exclaimed, making me wince. "If somebody's come up with a way to disguise himself as the Olympian, then the world's in serious danger!"

"Prethithely," said Plasmo, sounding proud of himself.

Jetstream began shuffling toward the outside corridor. I grabbed him by the arm. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"The phone," he said, in the tone of somebody speaking to an idiot. "We have to call The Danger Squad."

"To hell with them," I said fervently.

"What?"

"You know the rules of engagement. Whoever catches the crisis fights the bad guy. No matter what the odds. No matter how high the stakes. This one...belongs to us."

Silence reigned in the ward around us.

Enchanter's eyes were saucers. Literally. He even had coffee cups on them.

Crime-Stomper spoke first. "No doubt about it, Night Rat. You've lost it."

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"I can't believe I'm agreeing with him for the second time in one day," Jetstream said. "But he's right. Look at us. Two of us can't move, two of us can barely think, the three of us who can both move and think can't be trusted to make it down a flight of stairs. We're not in any shape to go into battle. We couldn't take out an arthritic pickpocket, even if he wanted to surrender to us. And you want us to take on the Olympian? Or Baron Death? Or whoever's behind this scheme, even assuming you're right about this being a scheme? Get real."

There was a moment of uneasy silence, during which I came very close to admitting that they were right.

And then Anvil-Man laughed.

It was a pained laugh, mostly because every chuckle strained the ribs still healing beneath his full-length body cast; every robust "ha!" was followed by an equally robust moan. But the laughs seemed more powerful than the moans, somehow. And they filled the room with that mythic sense of destiny that I'd long since come to associate with the turning point of any battle.

We all felt it. Deep in our bones.

I had just enough time to reflect that if Anvil-Man was capable of inspiring us, then we were even more pathetic than I'd thought, before Crime-Stomper whispered the set-up line: "Uh? Anvil-Man? What's so funny?"

"Don't you see it?" Anvil-Man shouted. "If we really wanted to GET REAL, would we even BE in this business? Winning against impossible odds is what we're all about!"

That did it, for us.

The Enchanter summoned his mystic cloak from the closet. Crime-Stomper let out a battle cry. Plasmo fanned out to all four corners of the room and gathered us together for a group hug. Jetstream removed his flame-dampening glove and shot off a celebratory burst of fireworks. Jukebox led us all in a rousing rendition of "We Are the Champions," which predicably brought in Nurse Kent a second time. I felt a seizure coming on, and for the first time since being shut away in this starched white prison actually managed to fight it off.

And just as the celebration started to pall, with everybody facing the stark realization that they didn't even have the beginnings of an idea what we were expected to do next, Jukebox sang out a ten-second medley of the

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Jags' "Back of My Hand (I've Got Your Number)," Steve Miller's "I'm Gonna Grab Ya," Ritchie Valens's "Come On Let's Go," the Supremes' "Nowhere to Run," and, oddly enough, Richard Harris's "MacArthur Park."

He'd thought of a plan...

IF YOU READ any newspapers at all, you know what the explanation was. How the man in the armor wasn't Baron Death, but a small-time villain called The Leech, who had the ability to absorb and store the powers from any unwary superheroes who happened to be in the vicinity. We all knew the Leech, having encountered him once or twice, but he'd never been a real threat, since it took him days to absorb enough power to make a difference, and us only thirty seconds to put him away with a good right hook. But Baron Death had seen in him a good way to gather up all the world's superpowers for himself — he'd just welded the poor guy into a junked-up version of his own armor, fitted him with a neural paralyzer so he wouldn't be able to tap into all the power he was getting, and ordered a robotic Olympian impersonator to usher him from one superhero hangout to another, as his "prisoner," arranging for him to "escape" every time he'd drained the well dry.

A brilliant plan. One so obvious in retrospect that it's hard to see how come we didn't see it right away. I guess that's why Baron Death's number one in the villain business. But this time he made the mistake of choosing us as his first helpless victims.

You know the rest of it, too — how we escaped the hospital in a makeshift flying machine hastily constructed from our beds, and how we fought the robotic Olympian impersonator in an epic battle that flattened six square blocks of Manhattan, how we faced Baron Death in his secret laboratory beneath Disney World, and how, at the end, when the bomb that would blow up North America was ticking down its last thirty seconds and the rest of us were trapped by the Baron's evil paralysis ray, the immobile plaster-encased form of Anvil-Man saved the day by plummeting from the rafters where we'd left him at the precise moment the Baron removed his protective helmet to mock us with the sight of his hideously scarred face.

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This may not strike you as a great way to regain one's lost dignity, but it sure as hell worked for us.

And then, when it was over, we piloted our makeshift flying machine high over the city. Jetstream had welded the beds together. Jukebox and I lay side-by-side in two forming a U, cushioned by blankets, peering down at the city through the wire mesh of the bedframes, and singing "Born to Be Wild." We'd mounted Crime-Stomper's traction bed at the head of this construct, making him resemble one of the wooden figureheads that fronted nineteenth-century sailing ships. He liked that. Anvil-Man's bed rode on top of the U, forming the upper deck — we'd given him some weighted bedpans to drop in case we ran into any trouble out there. Jetstream straddled his body cast, flaming hands held aloft to inflate the hot air balloon we'd made of Plasmo. As for the Enchanter, he floated along beside us, once again insubstantial, neither helping nor hindering our progress...but though I couldn't see him from where I was I somehow knew he was smiling. Eventually, Jetstream asked, "Where to? Back to the hospital?"

"No," I said. "We can't go back to the hospital. Not while evil still flourishes. Not while there are still wrongs to be righted. Not while they still expect us to eat that crap they serve. No — it's time for bad guys to beware. Because a new breed of crime-fighter is in town."

That started a whole new round of cheering, which continued unabated until Crime-Stomper used his nose to ring the buzzer that he'd used for so many years to ring the nurse: "All right. Listen up, people, I just spotted something. A rehearsal for the big time. A dark alley between a peepshow parlor and a homeless hotel. Mugger holding two tourists at gunpoint."

"Take us down!" I shouted. "This is a job for — "

We all shouted it together.

"...THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED!"

And Jetstream and Plasmo took us into a power dive, with Jukebox performing a soundtrack straight out of Wagner.

This one's for Julius Schwartz.

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Mary Rosenblum is currently working on a mystery series set in Hood River, Oregon. The first novel, Devil's Trumpet *is due out in about six months.*

Mary calls this new story an example of "American Magic Realism," but it seems to me we need a better term, something akin to "Southern Gothic" that could apply to stories of the Pacific Northwest (like the recent novels of Nina Hoffman and Jack Cady). Hmm, that's a bit of a stumper. Fortunately for us all, we don't need labels to enjoy poignant stories like this one that explore classic American myths.

The Rainmaker

By Mary Rosenblum

"SO HE'S A FRAUD?" DAD SAID.

"Well, have *you* ever heard of a genuine rain-maker?" Uncle Kenny cut a neat triangle out of his stack of pancakes. "Sandy, I swear these could be Mom's hotcakes. I never could get 'em right."

"You'd say anything for a free breakfast, little brother." Mom ruffled his hair the way she does mine, and she flipped three more of the browned cakes onto a plate. "Better eat these, Donny, before your uncle talks me out of 'em. So how come you don't arrest this man, if he's a fraud? You're the Sheriff." She planted her hands on her hips. "It's a crime, cheating folks around here. Who has any money to waste, with the cattle market so bad?"

"We sure as hell don't." Dad pushed his chair back. "Got to check those heifers." He reached for his hat. "We're gonna run out of pasture in about two weeks," he said in a tired voice. "Guess I'll have to ship a bunch out, in spite of the beef prices. Once they start losing weight, I won't get squat for 'em anyhow."

"Hey, you could hire this rainmaker." Uncle Kenny speared the last sticky forkful of pancake and wiped the syrup from his plate with it.

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"I kind of wish I could." Dad wasn't smiling. For a moment he held Uncle Kenny's narrow stare, then he turned away. My uncle shook his head.

"John sounds like he wants to get religion." He laughed.

"Don't, Kenny." Mom was collecting dishes. "It's tough right now."

"It's always tough for him, isn't it? This rainmaker dude is slick." He changed the subject abruptly. "He doesn't promise anything. Not in writing, anyway. If folks want to be stupid and give him money, it's not a crime."

"He's trading on faith." Mom's face had gotten tight. "That's a sin, even if it's not a crime."

"I sure agree with you." Uncle Kenny sighed, and kissed her as he got to his feet. "Wish you made the laws, Sis. So, Donny-boy." He grinned down at me. "You ready to ride?"

Mom was looking at me, and I had to say yes. I'd been just about willing to kill to ride with Uncle Kenny, sitting shotgun beside him as he tooled the green and white Sheriff's Department Jeep through the sage that was mostly what makes up Harney County. Everybody liked Uncle Kenny. It used to make me feel real important, seeing how respectful everyone treated him. I licked my lips, trying to think of an excuse not to go. "Sure," I finally said, and pretended not to notice Mom's eyes get narrow.

"You'll make a good deputy, kid." He slapped me on the shoulder — hard enough to hurt. "Let's go."

Uncle Kenny put his sunglasses on when he got into the car. I didn't say much as we drove back into town. It was hot, and I had the window down all the way, but the July heat washed over me, making me hotter. There isn't much to Burns. The high school. A few streets on either side of highway 20. A lot of sage beyond that, in gray-green clumps. You got rocks, too, and dust the color of a buckskin mustang's hide. I saw a ghost in the distance, just walking through the sage. He was carrying a bucket.

I see them a lot — the ghosts. Sometimes I think the desert preserves them, like it does the old homesteaders' cabins that are scattered all through the sage. Or maybe the ghosts are everywhere, but it's just easier to see them out here. I told my mom about them when I was six. She went in the bedroom and cried, after. I heard her through the door. I never talked

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about 'em after that. They don't pay us any attention anyway. I wonder if they even know we're here?

"You're sure talkative," Uncle Kenny spoke up. "Can't shut you up for a second. Something eating at you, Donny-boy?"

"No sir." I could feel his eyes on me, but I couldn't stop looking at the ghost.

"Maybe we need to talk," he said in a real quiet voice.

I sneaked a quick look at him then, and yeah he was looking at me. I stared at my twin faces in the mirrored surface of his glasses, and my stomach kind of folded in on itself, so I could feel the lump of the pancakes I'd eaten. Then his head jerked a little and he turned sharp without warning, so that I had to grab the door. We were pulling into the parking lot of the motel across the street from the high school, tires squealing. No siren.

This was Wednesday in late July. The lot should have been empty — too early in the day for the truckers to be stopping, or the folks passing through on their way to somewhere else. But it was full — so full that Uncle Kenny pulled up behind two big Ford rigs slantwise, not even bothering to look for a parking space. A green and orange patio umbrella stuck up over the crowd at the back of the lot, out where the asphalt left off and the sage began. Everybody was back there, crowding around like it was a booth at the county fair.

"Let's go, Donny." Uncle Kenny threw off his seatbelt like he was mad. "Time to further your education."

Relieved, I scrambled out after, wondering if I could find someone I knew and get myself invited over for the afternoon. Uncle Kenny would buy that.

The crowd around the umbrella parted to let my uncle through, and I followed, looking hard for a face...any face. I saw a bunch of people I knew — Mr. Franke, who managed the Thriftway, and the lady who always worked the cash register at the Payless. No kids, though. Then I saw Mrs. Kramer, my English teacher. I stopped short, like I was skipping school, even though it was summer. It made me feel funny, seeing her there in blue jeans like anybody, with my uncle pushing past her.

"We see the world clearly, when we're children." A man's rich voice rose over the murmur of the crowd. It sounded like velvet feels and it sent

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shivers down my back. "When we're very young, we believe what we see. It's only as we grow up that we learn to doubt — to disbelieve the things that we once knew were real. When we were children, we knew we could summon the rain — or wish it away."

"I don't remember making it rain." Mrs. Kramer spoke up in her late-homework tone and I craned my neck trying to see, because I bet that guy was cringing.

"Our yesterdays change to suit today's belief." The man sounded like he was smiling. "Haven't you ever listened to the arguments at a family reunion? You don't really need me, but if you can't remember how to bring the rain yourselves, you can pay me to do it."

I forgot about Uncle Kenny and pushed forward, not even noticing who I was shouldering past. The man's words made me shiver again — inside this time, like taking too deep a breath of frosty winter air. I was waiting for Mrs. Kramer to cut him off at the knees, like she does when you tell her how the goat ate your homework, but she didn't say anything.

"You got a vendor permit, mister?" Uncle Kenny spoke quietly, but everybody stopped talking right away. He was like that. He could walk into a noisy bar and talk in a normal voice and everybody would shut up to hear him. "You got to have a permit to peddle stuff in this town." He stepped forward, and I could see the man now, squinting from the umbrella's shade. He didn't look like he sounded. He was small, kind of soft and pudgy, with a round sweating face and black hair that Mom would have wanted to neaten up. I was disappointed, I guess.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff." He spread his hands. "I didn't know I needed a permit to talk."

"Folks work hard for their money around here." My uncle hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. "The government takes a big bite and maybe, if beef prices are high enough, we can pay the mortgage and feed our kids on what's left." He paused, looking around at the faces that surrounded him. Everybody had moved back a little, making a ring, like you do when there's a fight out behind the gym. "What you do should be against the law." He turned his attention back to the little man. "It isn't, but we don't have to put up with your slimy kind." He let his fingers curl loosely over the top of his holstered .44. The little man nodded at the gun, his lips pursed.

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"Are you threatening to beat me up or shoot me?" he asked mildly.

The silence around us got real tight and I looked away, thinking of the winter night when I had watched through the steamed-up windshield as Uncle Kenny beat up this ranch hand who'd been starting a lot of ugly bar fights in town. "Sometimes you got to know the right language," he had said when he returned to the car. He had wiped the blood from his hands carefully on a towel he pulled from under his seat. "Jail doesn't scare his kind much. But now — he'll mind his manners. I'm just tryin' to save him from knifing somebody one night, and getting himself a prison sentence for it."

I'd believed him. I watched my uncle's lips tighten.

"Tell you what," he said in a hard voice. "You're so sure you're God's messenger, Mister Rainmaker, let's make a little wager. You make it rain on my place, I'll pay triple your fee." He tilted his head slowly back to stare at the hot, hard sky. Not a cloud anywhere — not even a wisp of cirrus. "It don't rain, then you move on and don't ever set foot in Harney County again." He lowered his head, his eyes as hard as the sky. "You willing to put it on the line, Rainmaker?"

"Whatever you want." The man shrugged. "But I don't make rain. I just call it."

"How 'bout you call it right now?"

"I can start right now." The Rainmaker pursed his lips into a little frown. "It takes time for weather to happen. I don't do Hollywood special effects. We're talking a shift in the jet stream, cold fronts and warm fronts. Big masses of air and moisture. Takes time to move that much around."

"Yeah, got you." Uncle Kenny turned around slow, talking to the crowd now. "So if it rains sometime next Christmas, you did it?" He winked. "That's how it works?" People laughed, but the clear space got bigger around the umbrella and the little man. Only Ms. Kramer didn't move.

"I don't think my cows can wait till Christmas," someone said.

"It won't take that long." The man answered solemnly, as if Uncle Kenny had asked a real question. "Couple of days — maybe four." He shrugged. "When it gets close, I'll let you know."

"And it'll rain right on my land, huh? Just there?"

"Why not our south pasture?" I spoke up. "Grass'd sprout in a couple

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of days back there if it rained. Dad could put the heifers in instead of sellin' 'em." I looked at my uncle. "You don't have any cattle. You don't need the rain."

"Good idea." Hiram Belker, our neighbor to the east, spoke up from the crowd. "Maybe some of that there water'll land on my back forty." He guffawed — was answered by more laughter.

"Why not?" Uncle Kenny slid his sunglasses into place and turned his shiny mirrored gaze on me. "Hell, do my poor brother-in-law a favor. We'll make it a public event. I'll put up a notice on the bulletin board in the Courthouse lobby when our wizard here decides the rain's comin'. We can party." He grinned around at the crowd. "Don't forget your umbrellas, folks."

He turned away and people turned with him, like he'd given an order. I looked to see if the Rainmaker was mad about that, but he just looked tired. He noticed me looking and gave me a small smile. I smiled back, wondering how he meant to do it, then flinched as my uncle's hand landed hard on my shoulder.

"How 'bout we go get a burger, Donny-boy? We can watch for the clouds to show up."

"It's kind of early for lunch." My voice sounded squeaky.

He opened his mouth to reply, but just then one of my uncle's deputies tapped him on the shoulder. "Kenny? Ronny Carter just called in." He shook a Marlboro out of the squashed pack in his uniform pocket. "You'll never guess what he found out in the sage on his summer range — over by White Horse Creek? The Rojas kid's old beater Chevy."

"Is he sure it's Rojas's?" Uncle Kenny pushed his hat back on his head. "I thought he took off to Mexico to visit his mother, way back in November. Did he find a body?"

"Nope." The deputy dragged on his cigarette and blew out a blue lungful of smoke. "Found the registration. Coyotes had all winter."

Uncle Kenny turned to me. "Let's go, Donny-boy."

"Excuse me." The Rainmaker had finished folding his umbrella. "I don't know my way around here." He brushed dust carefully from gray slacks that looked prissy alongside the jeans everybody else pretty much wore. "Perhaps your nephew could show me where you expect this rain to fall? Or are you free to escort me?"

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"Sure," I said, before Uncle Kenny could say anything. "I'll show you."

Uncle Kenny just looked at me, long and hard, and then shrugged and spat. "Whatever you want, kid." He turned his back on us, and walked off with his deputy.

The motel lot was almost empty now. The crowd had left a scatter of crumpled burger wrappers, pop cups, and cigarette butts to mark where it had been. I remembered our one trip to the beach, when I was eight — how the tide had left the same litter of dead seaweed, trash, and broken shells on the clean white sand. I'd found a dead seal, all bloated, with empty eye sockets and grinning yellow teeth. There were ghosts there, too — harder to see, like shadows, but they were there.

"What's your name?" The Rainmaker was looking at me with this thoughtful sort of expression.

"Donald," I said.

"Dimitri." He offered me a pudgy hand and I shook it solemnly. Dimitri sounded foreign. Russian or something. "Saturday hours are precious ones," he went on. "Thank you for giving up a few of them for me. Here." He handed me the folded umbrella, nodded at a dusty blue Dodge Caravan parked on the far side of the lot.

It wasn't a good car for the desert. But when he opened the back, I saw camping gear, some canned stuff in a box, and a couple of five-gallon water jugs. Full. Okay, he wasn't stupid anyway. I got into the front seat beside him, wondering how he'd explain it when the rain didn't come. "What?" I said, when he just sat there staring at me.

"Your seatbelt."

I buckled it. Only Mom ever nagged me about the seatbelt. "Left on Highway Twenty," I said. "Take the first right after the gas station."

He turned the key, frowned as the engine sputtered. When it finally caught, he gunned it and pulled out of the motel lot. Clogged fuel injectors, I wanted to tell him. Pour some cleaner in the gas tank before you have to pay to get 'em fixed. "Turn here," I said, when we got to the track that led back to our spring pasture. "I'll get the gate." A ghost was walking along the fence line as if he was checking the wire. He had a weathered face and wore tattered work pants held up by suspenders. I waited until he passed by before I unhooked the wire gate and pulled it aside.

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When I climbed back into the front seat, the Rainmaker was staring at the place where the ghost had vanished. He looked at me, nodded, but didn't say anything more as we bounced slowly along the track. Something metal was rattling in the back. Pots and pans, sounded like.

"Do you really call the weather?" I licked my dry lips, wishing he'd go faster so we'd get a breeze. "Or are you a phony?"

"That's a refreshingly direct question." He chuckled. "Your uncle thinks I'm a phony." We topped a rise and the Rainmaker halted the car. Turned off the engine and opened the door. "This feels like a good place," he said.

He walked away from me and stopped right on the edge of the slope. A pronghorn lifted her head from the sage, eyed us for a second, then trotted slowly away, her white sides flashing in the scorching sun. I wiped my face on my sleeve. I swear the Rainmaker wasn't even sweating. He stood there, looking like he was standing on a city street, just staring out at the sage and rock and dust that stretched to the horizon. This time of year, dry as it was, there wasn't any grass left to speak of. Just sage, and greasewood, and rabbit brush.

I got out, too, thinking that this was stupid, that this guy was a scam, and he'd wave his hands around, and then sneak off when nobody was looking. And I realized I was thinking all this in my uncle's voice. So I quit. And just listened to the desert. It talks, you know. Real quiet — the sound of dust sifting against rock, and wind whispering through sage stems, sand shifting under a mule deer's hoof or a jackrabbit's paws. It doesn't notice us much. I told Mom about that, too. Once. She didn't cry, but it bothered her. I could tell.

The Rainmaker stood there in the blazing sun, arms at his sides, just staring into space with this kind of distant look on his face. And for a moment...just a few seconds, I guess...I felt something. It was like the air got solid. I don't mean I couldn't breathe or anything. But it was like I could *feel* it — the air, could feel the clouds in it, hung up and leaking on the Cascade Mountains, could feel the cool dampness beyond them where all that water evaporating from the summer ocean was pushing inward. And I could feel...a weak spot. Where that nice damp air could push our way.

A ground squirrel scuttled over my toes. I jumped back, startled, and

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lost the feeling. Figured I'd just imagined it. I kicked a shower of dust after the vanished critter. Looked up to see the Rainmaker smiling at me.

"Tomorrow evening," he said, like he was agreeing with me. "We were lucky — finding that weakening in the high pressure ridge."

I nodded and swallowed. Because his eyes were older even than old Mr. Long's, and he was a hundred and two. The Rainmaker looked out over Dad's pasture again, and now he just looked sad. "It's tough to believe in what you see," he said softly. "When everyone knows it can't be true. Come on. I'll take you home."

I shivered, and didn't answer him as I got back into the car. He drove me back down the track, and then up the main driveway to our house. And it wasn't until I had gotten out at the front door and he was driving away that I realized I'd never told him where I lived.

THE SKY WAS CLEAR that night, with just a sliver of a moon, and the Milky Way swept a white path across the sky, so clear that you could believe that it was a road, like in the old Indian tales, where you could ride a horse up it, right up into that sky.

"Hey, it's gonna rain tomorrow." Uncle Kenny had dropped by for dinner, like he did just about every night. "Can't you tell?"

"I'd sure take it, if it came." Dad popped another beer. "Hell, I'd pay the man." He helped himself to a slice of meat loaf with a grunt. "Pass me the potatoes, will you, Sandy?"

"Did I tell you we found the Rojas kid's car?" Uncle Kenny said. "Back along White Horse Creek." He reached for the meat loaf. "I guess the coyotes cleaned things up."

"Julio?" Mom paused, the steaming bowl of potatoes in her hand. "He went back to Oaxaca. To visit his mother."

"Guess not." Uncle Kenny forked meatloaf onto his plate. "Drug deal gone bad, is my guess."

"No!"

"Don't kid yourself, Sandy." My uncle chewed, reached for his beer. "He was selling. Everybody knew it."

"Hard to believe." Dad tilted his beer can to his lips. "He was a hard worker, that kid. Worth his pay — and that's rare enough these days. Kids

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don't know how to work anymore. They grow up and figure that an hour with a shovel'll kill 'em." He looked at Mom. "You gonna hold onto those all night?"

Mom looked down at the bowl in her hands. With a jerky movement, she set it in front of Dad. Then she carried her untouched plate into the kitchen. Uncle Kenny finished his dinner and went over to click through the TV channels. Dad opened another beer. I slipped out of the house and walked up the rise behind the barn. You could see over toward the spring range from up here. Julio used to sit on a rock that stuck out over the dry wash behind the barn and play his guitar. He taught me chords. He told me how it was, growing up in Mexico. I told him about the ghosts once. He told me that his family had a party for the dead every year — that they're around. Same as us. I was about to go back to the house when I spotted a ghost walking along the lip of the wash. It disappeared near the rock where Julio used to sit. Early in the spring, I found some withered flowers on that rock. I went back to the house where Mom shoved a too-big piece of apple pie at me and didn't ask me where I'd been.

"Sky cloudin' up yet? Smellin' rain in the air?" Uncle Kenny laughed and forked pie into his mouth, but the look he gave me stung like the flick of a quirt.

I told Mom I was tired, and went on up to bed.

"He's in love," I heard Uncle Kenny say as I climbed the stairs. "He's got all the signs."

I got onto the bed, but it was still hot up here, even with the fan on. I turned the light off and just lay on top of my sheets in my T-shirt and shorts. When I heard Mom's footsteps on the stairs, I realized I'd been waiting for her to come up. I pulled the sheet over me and sat up in the dark.

She didn't turn on the light, and she didn't say anything, but I felt the edge of the bed sink. For a while we both just sat there. The air was thick with heat up here, and for a moment, I felt it again — clouds, rain, wind — like a giant quilt that was constantly changing, shifting, moving above us. "Uncle Kenny's a good Sheriff, right?" The words sort of came out on their own. I didn't mean to say anything, hoped she'd let it pass.

"Yes, he is." She brushed the hair off my forehead, like she did when I was sick. "Julio didn't do it, you know? Sell drugs. He was so lonely." Her

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voice faltered. "He was in love with a girl in Oaxaca. He made up songs for her on his guitar. What's wrong, Donny?" She had her hand under my chin now, so that I couldn't look away from her. "What happened between you and Kenny?"

I swallowed, but the words had balled up in my throat. I could only shake my head, glad it was dark.

"This is a hard place to live." She stood up. "He's a good man, Donny, even if he has to be hard, at times. Justice means everything to him. That's why he's good for the county."

I didn't have anything to say to that. She took her hand away after a while, and stood up without saying anything more. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling for a long time after she went downstairs. I heard my uncle drive away in his county Jeep, I heard my parents come upstairs to bed. Dad stumbled on the stairs and it sounded like he fell. Mom said something in the tone she uses when a cow is having trouble calving. I waited until their door closed, then I got up and went to the window. It was cool outside now, and the stars still glittered. But as I leaned over the sill into the night, I could feel the distant rain pressing against the air, pushing at it. It was on its way.

I waked before the sun was up and left the house just as it got light. The eastern sky had gone pink and soft gray as I followed the wash down across the east pasture. When it rained, the steep-sided little canyon filled up with water. Fast. My dad and I had had to ride out in a freak storm one spring, to move cattle out from where they'd holed up in the bottom, before it flooded. I remember that afternoon real well — lightning breaking across the sky in blue forks, rain falling in stinging sheets, the horses snorting and trying to bolt. The cattle milled in the shelter of the willow brush in the bottom, not wanting to move. Uncle Kenny had showed up on his rangy black mustang to help, still in uniform because he was on duty. The three of us had finally gotten the twenty or so cows and calves started up the bank — just as a wave of brown water had come foaming down the bed. It had caught my pony, and he had reared, belly-deep in an instant. I knew we were goners. But then Uncle Kenny had grabbed the reins and hauled us both out of the flood. "Too cold for swimmin'," he'd said, and laughed.

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I left the wash and climbed the slope, squinting at the first blaze of sun above the distant horizon. I stopped to get my breath on the ridge. Down below, near the highway fence, a dusty blue Dodge Caravan was parked by a crooked juniper. The Rainmaker was sitting on a little folding stool beside the car, a steaming mug in his hand. He smiled and nodded as I reached him, and stood up as if he'd been waiting for me to show. "You can tell me the good place for breakfast," he said.

The good place, he'd said. I thought about that. "The Spur," I said.

The parking lot was crowded. The Rainmaker didn't say anything as he parked at the edge of the lot. He turned off the engine and started to open the door.

"Can I do it?" I said. My voice sounded too loud, or too soft, I wasn't sure which.

"Do what?" He didn't turn around to look at me.

"Call the rain." I swallowed. "I can feel it coming. It's gonna get here soon."

"Tonight." He still didn't look at me. I thought he'd be glad, but his shoulders drooped, the way Mom's did when Dad had to take out the loan to pay the feed bills. "Yes." He went quiet again for a minute. "You can do it. But once you do — you don't live in the same world with everybody else anymore. Think about that." He opened the door suddenly, letting in a gust of hot dusty wind. Got out.

I wanted to ask him more — lots more — but he wasn't going to answer me, so I didn't say anything as we went inside. It was crowded. The booths and formica-topped tables were mostly full and cigarette smoke drifted beneath the wagon-wheel lights with their yellow globes. It felt like evening instead of bright morning. And it got quiet while the waitress hustled us over to a table. I recognized a couple of faces from the motel parking lot yesterday. And Uncle Kenny was there — drinking coffee in his regular booth by the door where he could see the whole room. He was sitting with one of his deputies, and I could feel him looking at me as I walked past like I hadn't seen him.

I sat down with my back to him and stared at the typed menu in its plastic sleeve. The words didn't make any sense, but I wasn't hungry anyway. "Can I have coffee, please?" I asked the impatient waitress. "And a cinnamon roll."

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The Rainmaker ordered the breakfast special — steak and eggs with hashbrowns and toast. He looked up as the waitress bustled away and Uncle Kenny took her place. "Good morning, Sheriff." He smiled a bland, kind of tired smile.

"It ain't raining." Uncle Kenny pulled a chair out with a scrape that sounded way too loud in the utter silence that now filled the room. "So you chose up sides, huh, kid?"

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of movement. A gray-haired old man was making his way down the aisle with a check in his hand. As he reached the cash register, he vanished.

"I'm talkin' to you, kid." My uncle's tone pulled my head back around like he'd tied a string to my jaw. "Your mom know you're here?"

I nodded, wondering who the old man had been, why he walked here, and made myself meet my uncle's eyes. She loves you. The words started swelling inside me like bread dough. Do you know that? That she loves you? More than me. More than Dad, even. *Little brother.*

"Easy," the Rainmaker murmured. Like I'd spoken out loud.

Uncle Kenny looked away — at the wall, with its pictures of bronc and bull riders, Warm Springs Indians on rough-coated Paints riding beside cowgirls with satin shirts, spangles, and silver-mounted tack in rodeo parades. "So when's the show?" He pushed his chair back, talking to the Rainmaker like he'd forgotten I was there. "When do we get our rain?" He was talking loud and everybody in the place was listening to him. "Hey, we're spending the money. We want to be there when the curtain goes up."

"It'll probably rain tonight." The Rainmaker leaned back a little as the waitress plunked the big oval platter with his steak and eggs down in front of him, set down the smaller plate piled with toast, and whipped the coffee pot over his cup. She didn't fill mine, gave me a dirty look like I was drinking whiskey and not coffee as she paraded away.

"You don't sound too sure." Uncle winked around the restaurant, got chuckles and skeptical grunts on cue.

"No." The Rainmaker cut a precise rectangle of steak. "Nothing is certain in real life." He placed the meat neatly in his mouth.

Uncle Kenny snorted and turned his back. "I'll come wait with you tonight." He didn't look back as he strode across the restaurant. "You all are invited, too." He gave the room one last grin that seemed to focus on

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every person there. Got a couple of hoots in reply. "It's my party. Take the gate just west of the Highway Motel...north side of the highway. Look for my rig on the road. And bring your umbrellas." Chuckling, he pushed through the door. I heard his car start up outside.

The Rainmaker didn't seem to notice the stares as he ate his breakfast. They made me want to crawl under the table, but I sat up straight and turned my empty cup around and around, wishing the waitress would give me more coffee. Finally he was done and we got up to go. When the cashier told us he was $1.50 short, he looked up at her so sharp she flinched. "He never got his cinnamon roll," he said, with a nod in my direction.

He had noticed, and not said anything.

I wasn't sure if I was pissed or not.

WE DROVE BACK out to the dry wash where we sat in the shade of a twisted juniper, watching its shadow creep across the ground. Waiting for the rain, I guess. The flowers on the rock had blown away a long time ago. "You were going to tell me," I said. "How to do it."

"I never said that." The Rainmaker gave me a severe look. "It's not something you can teach. So you have decided to stop being a part of the human race?"

"You're human." I tossed a pebble at a fence lizard basking under a clump of bittergrass, watched it scuttle indignantly away. I tossed another when he didn't say anything. I kept remembering the way people had looked at him in the restaurant. "It's just because you're a stranger in town." The words didn't sound very convincing.

"You better tell your mother where you are." He crossed his arms on his knees. "She's worrying."

I got up, dusting off my jeans. Because she was. Movement flickered across the draw. The ghost again. You can't see them very well in the bright sun. I don't think it really shines *on* them, or even through them. The light sort of covers them up instead. This one sat on the shelf of rock where the flowers had been. The Rainmaker noticed him, too. He looked at me and raised one eyebrow, but I turned my back on him and ran up the side of the wash, and all the way home, so that I came into the kitchen soaked with sweat.

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Mom met me with her fists on her hips, face stiff with anger, as if I'd skipped my chores. "Kenny told me where you were." Her voice trembled. "You go straight to your room, young man."

"Why?" I blurted out the word, angry myself, now. "What's wrong with having breakfast with..." I couldn't remember his name. "With the Rainmaker," I finished lamely.

"He's a fraud." She got angrier. "Where are your brains?"

"He's not a fraud."

"He's a crook. Cheating people."

"Who has he cheated, huh? You tell me who."

"Kenny said..."

"You always believe Uncle Kenny." I was yelling now. "Uncle Kenny is so damn perfect. You won't believe me, but anything he says..."

She slapped me.

For a moment I stared at her, face burning where her palm had struck, the sudden silence ringing in my ears. Then I turned and ran out of the kitchen, pounding up the stairs to my room. I slammed the door, and threw myself down on the bed. Mad at her. Mad at myself. Because a part of me had wanted her to tell me for sure that he was a fraud.

I lay on the bed, waiting for her to come upstairs, watching the sun move across the cloudless sky and sweating in the still heat of the upstairs. What if it didn't rain? I wasn't sure how I'd feel about that — or maybe I just didn't want to know. But she didn't come upstairs, and that hurt, too. And I guess I fell asleep after a while, because it was dark when I woke up, and Mom was setting a tray on my desk.

"I brought your dinner up." She turned on the light and straightened, pushing wisps of hair back from her forehead. "It must be ninety up here. Why didn't you turn on the fan?" She snapped on the old box fan, her fingers brisk and impatient on the switch. The sudden gust of air felt cool on my face, and I imagined for a second that I could smell rain, the way the animals can.

"Your uncle went down to where that...man is camped." Mom sounded uneasy. "He's worried that a lot of people might show up. That they might get...rowdy."

"They'll come because he told 'em to." I didn't look at her. "They'll beat up the Rainmaker. Because he wants them to."

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"No."

"Don't you get it, Mom?" I leaned forward, but she wouldn't look at me. "People always do what he wants 'em to do."

"Don't talk about your uncle like that." But she said it mechanically, in a dull tone without anger. "We couldn't make it without him. *I* couldn't make it." She got to her feet and walked out of the room.

I went over to the window, a fist squeezing my stomach until I thought I'd be sick. To the west — in the direction of the distant ocean — the stars ended in a band of pure darkness above the horizon. I felt the fist in my stomach loosen a hair, fixed my eyes on a small pair of dim stars. They vanished. A twinkling yellow star above them vanished a moment later. "Mom," I called out. "Clouds."

She came back to stand silently beside me at the window. I heard her swallow.

"Let's go down there," she said softly. "Your dad was going to haul the heifers to auction tomorrow."

We went downstairs together, tiptoeing through the living room, where my dad snored on the sofa, one hand loosely curled around a can of beer. I had never heard him snore before. His face looked soft and flushed. "Dad?" I stopped.

"He's all right." Mom's face was as still as a winter pond before a flight of geese lands. "He's just drunk." Her voice was without inflection.

I had never seen my father drunk. But I remembered his uncertain tread on the stairs every night, and her tone as she coaxed him to bed.

I thought Mom would take the truck, but she walked into the sage, as sure in the faint moonlight as if she came this way every day. I stumbled after her, tripping over sage stems and clumps of grass. I didn't catch up with her until she had reached the lip of the wash. The Rainmaker's camp was visible in the light from a single propane lantern. At least a dozen men milled in a loose circle around him. I recognized Uncle Kenny. He wasn't in his uniform. Suddenly he stepped forward, one hand closing on the front of the Rainmaker's shirt, lifting him onto his toes.

"You think we're a bunch of dumb cowboys, don't you?" His voice came to me on the wind, edged with violence. "We'll just grin and shuffle our feet and hand over our money to you, 'cause you're so smart, and we're just dumb hicks."

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The men around them growled and shuffled forward, as if they were puppets, and he'd yanked all their strings at once. I took a step forward, caught my toe in a sage stem, and fell flat on my face. Eyes full of grit, I struggled to my knees, spitting dust. I knew what was going to happen — could see it, like on a movie screen. My face was wet and I wiped it on my sleeve. Crying, I thought, as I staggered to my feet. I'm not crying.

"Kenny!" Mom's voice was shrill and strange, and down below, my uncle paused, his fist drawn back, his other hand clutching the Rainmaker's shirt front. He looked up at her.

More water hit my face. Cold water. I looked up and laughed.

It was raining.

The stars had vanished, and the rain came down all at once, like someone had upended a cosmic bucket. It pounded on the dry ground and made the sage shiver. Below, the bunched, angry men were milling like nervous cattle. Uncle Kenny still held the Rainmaker by the shirt, but he had lowered his hand. My mom was running down to him, her wet hair plastered to her head. She looked like a kid and I realized suddenly how old my dad was. One of the men whooped, and somebody pounded on the Rainmaker's back.

By the time I got down to the Rainmaker's camp, I was soaked to the skin and muddy. People were still hanging around. I knew who they were. All of them. They were watching the first streams of brown water run down the bottom of the wash. I looked up at the rock shelf where I found the flowers, and yeah, the ghost was there, standing on the very edge. And it was really dark, but I could see him better than I ever had before — like there was a spotlight shining on him.

Julio Rojas.

He looked sad. I looked at my mom, and she was staring at that rock, too, but she didn't see him. She had her hands pressed tight against her chest, like she hurt inside. And Uncle Kenny was looking at her, too. Water was starting to fill the wash, brown and foamy as chocolate, pouring down into the low land across the highway. When I looked again, Julio had gone from his rock, and I thought about the flowers, and my mom running down through the sage like she knew the way.

And I could feel the water, like I'd felt the rain. I guess it *was* rain — only on the ground now, and not in the sky. And if it ran down the east side

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of the draw, it would cut away a lot of the dirt beneath the rock shelf. I took a step away from everyone, staring at that chocolate flood, feeling it like it was a wet rope sliding through my hands, and I didn't really think about it, I just started to pull.

A thin stream welled over a low berm of silt and stones from last winter's floods, pushed a small rock out of the way. I was sweating. The rock tumbled down the slope and more water welled after it, pushing more stones out of the way, dissolving the dirt. Then, suddenly, the berm gave way and was gone as if it had never been. The flood divided, sweeping now along the steep east wall of the wash, eating away the dirt below the shelf.

Uncle Kenny stepped up beside me, not noticing me, his eyes on that dissolving bank. His shoulders were hunched and his hands clenched into fists. The rock shelf tilted and wavered, and I heard him take a fast, short breath.

It tilted some more, slid very slowly into the churning water, smashing flat the sparse willow stems that lined the sides. Something showed in the hole left in the bank. Something not dirt colored. "Look!" I pointed. "Over there, along the bank."

I guess a couple of people looked, because someone broke away from the crowd and walked along the lip of the wash, hat pulled down against the still-steady rain, water soaking his shirt and jeans. Mr. Walker. Owner of the Bar Double D. He stopped above the light-colored object and stepped quickly back. "It's a body," he yelled to us. "My God. Someone was buried here."

Everybody went running over, boots splashing through the water, a half dozen tall shapes in wet clothes and pulled down hats. My uncle didn't go. Neither did my mom. They were both looking at me. "It's Julio," I said. My mom's face didn't change, but she made a small sound, like a hurt animal.

"I was sleeping over the night he disappeared." My uncle spoke up in that slow, lazy drawl he uses when he breaks up a fight. "Remember, Sandy?" He turned to her, smiling a little, his hand on her shoulder. "Dave and I got to drinking, and I slept on the sofa. After we put Dave to bed."

I could feel his words turning solid in the air, reaching back over the weeks to change yesterday. I could feel my mom's relief as she started to

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nod. "No," I said. "You left. Dad watched TV after you were gone." And I had sneaked out, because the moon was full, and I couldn't sleep.

"Donny..." Mom whispered. "Don't."

Uncle Kenny had saved me when the flood caught my pony. He helped us a lot. When Dad was drunk. *We couldn't make it without him. I couldn't make it.* I heard my Mother's voice. Words took shape in my throat, stuck there like fish bones: *Oh yeah, I remember now. You slept over. Sorry, Uncle Kenny.*

The Rainmaker was looking at me, and he looked sad. Julio had taught me how to chord on his old, battered guitar. He had laughed, and missed the girl he had loved. Up on the bank, two of the ranchers were bending over Julio Rojas's body. I couldn't look at Mom. "I saw you," I said to my uncle. "I was up in the sage."

For a moment, my uncle stared at me, his face all edges, as if the flesh had eroded away, leaving nothing but bone. "You're dreaming, kid. I was in the house, asleep, when he took off. Ask your mom." His laugh sounded like something breaking. "You're the crazy kid who sees ghosts and talks to the damn desert. Who's gonna believe you?"

She had told him. I couldn't look at her, wondering who else he had told, chuckling about it over a beer maybe, in the Spur at night. The rain was running into my eyes, but I didn't try to wipe my face, just stood there waiting for her to agree with him. Because I was only a crazy kid who saw ghosts, and back home, Dad had passed out, and there were the cattle to deal with. The ranch.

"He's not crazy, Ken." Mom spoke softly. "And he's right." Her voice sounded empty and cold. "You left. I remember because...I had a hard time getting Dave up the stairs by myself that night."

For a long moment, my uncle and my mom stared at each other. Then my uncle turned away and slogged back toward the road. Only the Rainmaker saw him go. He was looking at me, standing hatless in the rain, his face as round and calm as the moon.

"Donny?" My mother's voice trembled. "Julio used to play his guitar for me." She closed her eyes briefly as we heard Uncle Kenny's car start. "He was so young and full of hope. He was a poet — he made those songs up himself. That's all that happened between us. I swear it."

I nodded, but I couldn't speak. There wasn't anything inside of me.

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Just night and rain. After a moment Mom turned away. I watched her trudge toward the road after Uncle Kenny. You couldn't cross the wash anymore. She would have to take the long way home — back to the empty house where my dad snored on the sofa. I flinched as the Rainmaker put a hand on my shoulder.

"I have to," I said. "Don't I?"

He squeezed my shoulder. "I'll make you some tea," he said, and his voice sounded as old as the desert. Sad. Two of the ranchers went running back to their parked cars. To find the Sheriff? I wondered. "No, thank you," I said politely. "Mom's waiting for me."

And she was — up on the road — hugging herself in the pouring rain. She straightened as I got close. "Are you going to go with him?" she asked softly.

I shook my head. "I used to listen to Julio play, too," I said. "He was really good. We'll have to tell someone."

She nodded once, eyes closed, then opened them and smiled at me. "We will." Then she reached for my hand, and as we walked along the road to our driveway together, the rain began to diminish to a slow, steady shower.

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When Jane Austen wrote Pride and Prejudice, *she wasn't writing about a pride of lions, was she?*

Ménage and Menagerie

By Pat Murphy
(under the influence of Jane Austen)

THE FAMILY OF RADFORD had been long settled in Devonshire. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Selwyn Park, in the center of their property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance.

Sir Radford, the present owner of the estate, did, in his habits, somewhat strain the reputation established by his father and his grandfather and his great grandfather before him. Sir Radford had a passion for exotic animals and the wealth to indulge that passion. A widower, he lacked the guiding hand of a wife to temper his eccentricities.

On his estate, he kept a menagerie of exotic creatures, brought to him by adventurers and explorers from all parts of the globe. A visitor, riding up the lane toward Sir Radford's large and handsome house, might hear the roar of an African lion or the shrieking laugh of a wild hyena. Sir Radford's collection included an Indian tiger, three ostriches from Africa, and an assortment of gaudily colored birds from the jungles of South America, all obtained at great expense.

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Though Sir Radford's wife had borne him no children, he shared his home with a young woman whom he had adopted as a daughter. There were those in the county who said that Miss Selina was his natural daughter, born in one of those exotic places where he had so often traveled, and brought home to be raised an Englishwoman. But the story, as Sir Radford told it, was that she was the only daughter of a gentleman in Russia who had been much like a brother to Sir Radford. When that gentleman had met with an unfortunate hunting accident, Sir Radford had taken the man's daughter as his own.

Whatever her ancestry, Miss Selina Radford was a handsome young woman, with black hair and sparkling hazel eyes. Sir Radford had engaged governesses to teach her, and she wrote a fine hand, played the pianoforte with considerable skill, and had a lovely singing voice. She was a hearty girl, given to long walks on the downs and vigorous rides.

Sir Radford was an exceedingly sociable gentleman. Every year, when spring mists and rain gave way to warmer weather, he invited his elderly cousin, Lady Dustan, to visit his estate. And so, in the spring of 1828, Lady Dustan came to the estate with a party of young friends.

Lady Dustan herself was never happier than when she had a noisy party of young people gathered about her, so that she could watch over them and speculate on how they might best be paired off, as matchmaking was one of her favorite occupations. The first evening at Selwyn Park, while Selina played the pianoforte and the assembled company listened politely, Lady Dustan and Sir Radford sat at the back of the room, where they might converse in lowered voices about the members of Lady Dustan's party. She had brought her two nieces, Mary and Lydia, and a young man, George Paxton. A second young man, William Gordon, had joined the party at Sir Radford's request.

"I think you will enjoy the company of Mr. George Paxton, the son of my dear friend," said Lady Dustan. "He has spent the past few years in the service of the British Museum doing something frightfully scholarly with plants and animals that are found in rocks."

"Fossils," Sir Radford ventured.

Lady Dustan fluttered her hand as if brushing away an annoying insect. "I suppose. He tried to explain it to me once, but I could make no sense of it. Something about chalk and seashells and dead creatures. He's

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left the museum in any case and taken up with the newly established Zoological Society. They're endeavoring to make a zoological garden in Hyde Park. He's a sweet-tempered, amiable, young man, though a bit diffident and retiring for his family's tastes. His mother wished him to go into the law or the army, but neither suited him. He prefers to putter about with rocks and animals, it seems. Still, I think he has an open and affectionate heart."

"I can understand wanting to putter about with rocks and animals," Sir Radford commented, with the slightest edge in his voice.

"Of course you understand, Sir Radford. But Lady Paxton is quite bewildered by his behavior." Lady Dustan smiled at the back of George Paxton's head. "I do believe that he and my niece, Lydia, would make a fine match. Their temperaments would complement one another admirably — she is an excitable girl and I think Mr. Paxton might help make her less prone to extravagance and passion. And she might help him approach life in a livelier manner. She's an amiable girl, though not terribly handsome. She has 10,000 pounds settled on her, and that would make his family much more willing to indulge his eagerness to study animals, rather than the law."

"I imagine that would make the young man very happy," Sir Radford observed.

"But I have no match for Lydia's younger sister, Mary. She's a lovely girl, though quiet by nature." Lady Dustan shifted her gaze to William Gordon. He was handsome enough, with a fine dark mustache and a military air. "And what can you tell me of Mr. Gordon?"

"He's a Navy man. He brought me two fine macaws when he returned from South America. And he says he may bring me a zebra when next he voyages to Africa."

"What of his character?"

"A steady man on a hunt, I can say that. He's a capital fellow, I think."

Lady Dustan shook her head, dismayed by Sir Radford's lack of useful information on the young man. Before she could inquire further or ask discreetly about Selina's prospects, Selina's song came to an end and Lady Dustan and Sir Radford joined in the polite applause. As the party moved off to the dining room, Lady Dustan continued to watch the young men that she had discussed with Sir Radford.

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"Your skill in playing is matched only by your beautiful voice," William was saying. "I've never heard better — not even in the finest salons in London."

Lady Dustan smiled. He flattered Selina unduly — her playing was adequate and her voice was quite pretty, but no more than that. She noticed that William took care to seat himself between Selina and Lydia.

At dinner, Sir Radford told them about his latest acquisition — a female elephant, purchased from a circus menagerie that had fallen on hard times. William had a few things to say about the unpredictable nature of elephants, information gleaned on his last expedition to Africa. "I saw a stampede of the great beasts," he said. "They trampled a village with no more trouble than you would take in trampling an anthill."

George tried to break in with some discussion of the plans of the Zoological Society with regard to African animals. They had already obtained an African elephant and they hoped to bring one of the beasts from Asia as well. And perhaps a giraffe, one of those ungainly creatures with the tremendously long necks.

Lady Dustan listened to the young men talk. She thought it unfortunate that George's considered and soft-spoken plans could not match William's tales of hunting for ferocious lions and visiting savage African villages. Lydia's eyes were on William. Young women were not inclined to understand the virtues of a quiet and thoughtful husband.

After dinner, Sir Radford prevailed upon the others to join him in a game of whist. Mary sweetly begged to be excused so that she might play the pianoforte, Sir Radford's instrument being so decidedly superior to the one she played at home. And Selina asked if she might listen to the music rather than playing whist, being an indifferent card player at best. William spoke up quickly, offering to keep Selina company.

While Sir Radford, Lady Dustan, George, and Lydia played cards, Selina and William chatted quietly in the corner. The music made it impossible for Lady Dustan to hear their conversation, but she noticed that they seemed content with one another's company. She also observed that George Paxton was oblivious to Lydia's smiles. The girl was animated in her enthusiasm for the game, her eyes bright with excitement, but George remained stubbornly distracted by the couple in the corner. Later, when Selina and William strolled onto the terrace to take the air, Lady

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Dustan kept her eye on George, who seemed rather downcast. He suggested a break in the game at that point, but Sir Radford insisted on another hand.

Mary had completed a song and the others had just finished their game when Selina and William returned. The young lady was laughing at something William had said, but her laughter lacked the ease of companionable amusement. Lady Dustan detected an edge of strain, a hint of something amiss.

"Miss Selina!" Lady Dustan called. "Where have you and Mr. Gordon been wandering?"

"Only as far as the aviary," William said. "It is a beautiful night for a stroll."

"Whatever have you been telling Miss Selina to amuse her so?" Lady Dustan asked. She regarded the young woman with interest. Selina's face was flushed; her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Foolish stories," Selina said. "That is all."

"I was describing a legend I heard among the African savages," William said. "When the moon is full, they say that some men turn into hyenas and run wild on the savannah." He smiled, showing his teeth entirely too freely, Lady Dustan thought. "The moon is almost full and the story came to mind when I heard the hyenas laughing in the distance."

"My dear child," said Lady Dustan. She took Selina's hand and pressed it in her own. "I'm sure no civilized people could ever believe in such a thing."

"On the contrary, Lady Dustan, many people have believed in stories that are equally fabulous," George Paxton said. Though he spoke to the assembled company, his eyes were on William and Selina. "Tales of men who become beasts go back to antiquity. In ancient Rome, learned men wrote of the turnskin, *versipellis*, a man who turned into a wolf. The French tell of the same creature, calling him *loup garou*."

William laughed. "Do you suppose the Zoological Society will have a *loup garou* in your collection, George? Would they welcome such a creature?"

George nodded, but his smile was strained. "If you would only bring us one, I would ensure that the creature found a home there."

Lady Dustan felt Selina's hand tighten on hers and patted the young

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woman's shoulder companionably. "Enough of these foolish tales. Play us another song, Mary, and let us leave these men to talk of their unlikely adventures together."

Dutifully, Mary began to play.

The next morning, George Paxton woke just after dawn when a peacock screamed under his window. He lay in bed for a moment, trying to recapture his dream. Selina had been in distress and he had been running to save her, confident that he would win her gratitude.

George was, as Lady Dustan had observed to Sir Radford, an amiable, open-hearted young man, though too quiet and diffident to do justice to himself. He was enthusiastic when he was engaged in pursuits that interested him, such as the study of natural philosophy. In those pursuits, his understanding was excellent and his scholarly endeavors had been greatly praised by his colleagues at the museum. But he was fitted neither by abilities nor by disposition to answer to the wishes of his family, who longed to see him in a distinguished profession.

In company, his tendency was to retire to a quiet corner and observe, rather than speak out and draw the attention of the crowd to his own accomplishments. He was aware of this tendency and regretted his natural shyness, but he could not bring himself to hold forth as William Gordon did.

Sunlight shone through his bedroom window, slipping through a small opening between the drapes. As the day was clear and bright, he dressed and went out for a walk in the garden before the rest of the company woke.

A peacock — perhaps the same one that had disturbed his slumber — strutted down the path ahead of him, colorful tail trailing in the dust. The path wound past a cage of parrots that greeted him with rude squawks and flapping wings. "Blast you to pieces!" one bird shrieked. "Blast you to pieces!" A scarlet macaw watched him with bright and beady eyes and croaked softly, "You're a bounder, you are."

No doubt Sir Radford had purchased the birds from sailors who had taught them these questionable refrains. Still, it was difficult to ignore the second bird's quiet insistence and steady gaze. "You're a bounder," the bird muttered again. George turned away, fighting the urge to protest that he was not a bounder, but he knew of a bounder in the vicinity.

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The night before, he had shared a nightcap with William Gordon after the other members of the party had gone to bed. Jovial and relaxed, William had told George of his walk with Selina in the garden. William seemed smugly confident that Selina was partial to him, saying that he had stolen a kiss from the young lady when they were strolling out by the aviary.

George had contained his feelings, listening to William's cheerful confession without comment but with a sick feeling at heart. He knew the man's reputation through his connections at the Zoological Society: an officer in the Navy, Gordon often returned from his travels with exotic animals for sale. He spent the money from these sales in a life of idleness and dissipation, riding and hunting and drinking and gambling. George knew that some thought Gordon handsome, but he thought the man had rather a brutish countenance.

"Yes, Miss Selina is a beautiful girl," William said. "And I am certain that Sir Radford will settle a tidy fortune on her at the time of her marriage." He smiled, showing his teeth, and George thought of the *versipellis*. In the company, he had not mentioned that the French attributed the nature of the *loup garou* to excess passion. Men who lacked control of their baser instincts were most susceptible to this transformation.

George shook his head, attempting to banish thoughts of the night before. The morning was beautiful; the air was fresh and clear — until he turned a corner and caught the scent of rotting meat. He found himself looking down a long straight path that ended at a tall wrought iron fence enclosing a section of pasture land. On the far side of the fence, a hyena was prowling.

The size of a large mastiff, the hyena was a strange, ungainly animal, with forelegs longer than its hindlegs and a back that sloped downward as a consequence. As George watched, the beast yawned, exposing an impressive assortment of yellowing teeth. Its eyes were bright and alert, but something — perhaps the way that the animal hunched its shoulders and looked up rather than looking honestly forward — gave it a servile and deceptive air.

As it paced, the hyena was giving its entire attention to Selina, who sat outside the fence on a bench in the sunshine. She had a sketchpad in her lap and her eyes were on her work.

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George hesitated, restrained by his natural shyness, then thought to approach quietly, so as not to disturb her. She did not look up as he approached, but when he was still several feet away she spoke. "Good morning, Mr. Paxton. You are abroad very early. Pray move softly, so you do not alarm my subject."

Stopping where he was, George noticed another hyena lounging in a bit of shade near the fence. Ignoring Selina and its companion in the enclosure, the animal was staring in his direction, its ears cocked forward.

"My apologies for disturbing you, Miss Selina," he said. "I did not think anyone else was awake yet."

"I often come walking early," Selina said. "Dawn is the best time to observe the animals."

She fell silent then, attending to her work. From where he stood, George could not see the sketch on her pad, so he contented himself with studying her hands, so delicate and pale, handling the pencil with skill and grace. Wishing to see the sketch, he took a step forward, but Selina, as if anticipating his interest, was already closing her sketchbook and looking up at him.

"May I look..." he began, but she waved him off with an air of diffidence.

"I am no artist, Mr. Paxton. My renderings are for my own pleasure only."

Though he wished to press the matter, George could think of no way to do so gracefully. As happened so often, he found himself at a loss, not knowing the proper formula of polite flattery that might persuade her.

Selina gathered her skirts and stood, holding her sketchpad and pencil. "I doubt the others are awake yet," she said easily. "Would you care to stroll through the garden? I am certain we will be back in time for breakfast."

"Yes, of course. I would be delighted."

George did not know what to say, as they walked through the garden together. Surely she must think him dull, walking in silence at her side. He knew that William would have been charming her with witticisms, but George could think of nothing clever to say.

"Tell me of your experiences with the creatures you have gathered for the Zoological Society," Selina said. "I was interested in your thoughts on

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how one should interact with wild animals. I saw you scowling yesterday when Mr. Gordon explained the techniques used by animal trainers."

George frowned again, remember that conversation of the day before. While Sir Radford was showing the company around the gardens, Lydia had stepped rather close to the tiger's cage. William had guided her away, saying that she must not approach the cage so closely. "I wanted to rub her ears," Lydia had said petulantly. "She looks so like a giant tabby."

"She may look like a giant house cat, but that is not the case," William had advised her. "She is a wild creature and will not tolerate such familiarity."

"I saw a circus trainer rubbing a tiger's head," Lydia had said.

"A trainer establishes his dominance over the animal and imposes his superior will. If you wish to interact with a wild beast, that is what you must do," William had explained in a tone that brooked no disagreement. "You must dominate and triumph over the animal's spirit. You must demonstrate who is master. Though you approach the beast with friendship, do not expect friendship in return. You can expect no such rational response."

"You look so disapproving," Selina said, recalling him from the memory. "Didn't you agree with Mr. Gordon's analysis? He has so much experience with wild creatures in Africa."

"Mr. Gordon and I have different feelings on the matter of wild animals. He wishes them to be under his control. I am interested in studying their lives, as they live under their own control."

"You only wish to watch them?"

"To meet with them on their own terms, not on mine. Sometimes, that means simply watching them. Sometimes, they allow a closer contact."

George thought of the bull elephant that the Zoological Society had acquired from a circus. When the beast first came to the Society, it was a foul-tempered creature. But after some months of observing the elephant's behavior, he came to understand the beast better. The elephant disliked harsh, loud voices and was moved to anger by certain aromas — the scent of a particular type of hair oil, the smoke of cigars. When the animal's former keeper from the circus had come to speak with members of the Zoological Society about the animal's temperament, he noticed that the

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man smoked cigars, used hair oil, and spoke in harsh, ungentlemanly tones. When asked the best way to control the animal, the keeper had suggested that they make use of the whip — the animal best understood pain and punishment. George took note and decided that the beast's prejudices were not irrational, but rather based on experience. Treated cruelly by a keeper, the creature naturally became wary of sounds and scents associated with that man.

Hesitantly, George told Selina of his findings. She nodded thoughtfully. "And you disagreed with his suggested treatment of the elephant?"

"To understand a wild creature, you must take the time to watch and wait," he said. "There is no use in rushing a wild thing. But Mr. Gordon does not wish to understand wild creatures. Rather, he wishes to bring them under his control."

"And you do not wish to control this elephant," she said. "By what you say, I think you want to be the beast's friend."

George thought for a moment, knowing that William would be most amused at the thought of being a wild creature's friend. Then he nodded. "I think that is a fair assessment, Miss Selina. I want to understand the beast and its way of thinking, and that is the basis for friendship."

"Why did you frown before you spoke?"

"If Mr. Gordon heard me speak of friendship with an animal, he would be most amused at my expense. Mr. Gordon mistakes kindness as a display of weakness."

She smiled archly. "You understand Mr. Gordon's responses just as you understand the elephant's." George began to protest, but she waved a hand, dismissing his words. They were nearing the house, and George thought it best to let the matter drop.

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Lady Dustan was planning the day's amusements. She greeted Selina and George with a detailed account of what would take place. Under Sir Radford's guidance, the party would tour the gardens. In the afternoon, they would have an *alfresco* tea beneath the shade trees near the elephant enclosure, with pigeon pies and cold lamb and wholesome bread and strawberries from Selwyn Park's own strawberry beds. Following tea, they would return to the house for a game of cards.

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Lady Dustan was decisive in such matters, and her plan was carried out with the precision of a military maneuver — until midway through tea.

The party was relaxing in the shade, conversing about the fine weather. The shade was most refreshing, and Lady Dustan was finding this time the most pleasant part of the day. She observed that William Gordon had found a seat in the midst of the ladies, where he was making every effort to amuse and be agreeable. He appeared to be paying every distinguishing attention to Selina. That young lady met his gallantries with polite smiles, but, Lady Dustan thought, showed him no particular favor.

Lady Dustan was disappointed to see that George Paxton stood apart from the other young people, making no effort to attract the ladies' attention away from Mr. Gordon. How could he remain so shy and standoffish when Lydia was so lively and amiable? She did not understand the man.

As she watched him, her gaze was drawn to the object of his attention: the bull elephant. The great beast was following the female closely as she trotted around the enclosure, keeping his enormous head close by her rump. When the female paused in a corner of the enclosure, he proceeded to sniff her in a most disconcerting manner, running his trunk between the smaller elephant's hind legs repeatedly, then pausing to trumpet loudly. At the same moment that Mary looked up, Lady Dustan noticed that the bull elephant seemed to have sprouted an additional leg.

"The strawberries are lovely," Mary was saying. Then she stopped, her mouth slightly ajar, as she stared at the bull elephant.

Lady Dustan could not avert her eyes from the elephant's prodigious member, an enormous shaft of flesh that twisted and curled like a snake. "I'm feeling a bit faint from the heat," Lady Dustan said. Her throat felt tight and her voice had a choked quality, but she managed to force out the words. "I believe the sun has been too much for me."

Sir Radford, who had been directing his attention to a thick slice of pigeon pie, glanced up with a frown. "The heat? In this cool shade?" Then following her gaze, he exclaimed in surprise.

For a time, all was in confusion, the strawberries forgotten. Lady Dustan called to the young women to accompany her to the house, as Sir

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Radford exclaimed about what a rare opportunity this was to observe the mating habits of the elephant, a sight never witnessed in the wild. William Gordon was unperturbed, gazing placidly at the elephant in pursuit of his lady love, but Lady Dustan observed a hot blush color George Paxton's face. As men crowded toward the fence of the elephant enclosure, the lady elephant retreated, hurrying away from the bull.

Like the lady elephant, Lady Dustan believed that retreat was the best option. "Come along, all of you," she said. "Lydia, Mary, Selina — let us return to the house."

Giggling like a schoolgirl, Lydia gathered her things. Mary continued to gaze at the elephants, more fascinated than perturbed, until Lady Dustan shooed her and her sister in the direction of the house. Lady Dustan walked with Selina, casting a glance over her shoulder at the men and the bull elephant. As they started away, the bull elephant reared up, placing his forelegs on the lady elephant's back. She shuddered beneath his weight, but stood her ground.

"Oh, Lord!" Lady Dustan breathed, an involuntary exclamation. She could feel the heat of blood rising in her cheeks as she turned away, taking Selina's arm and leading her toward the house. The blaring trumpeting of the bull elephant echoed through the garden, a noisy reminder of what went on behind them.

On the path to the house, Lady Dustan patted her face with a kerchief, feeling warm and agitated. "I would never have thought an elephant could look small," she murmured softly to Selina, her voice trembling with agitation. "But she looked small beside him."

"That is so," said Selina, "but she had her own way. He could not mount her until she stood still for it, and she did that only when she was ready. I have observed that whatever the species, the female has a choice. Sometimes, she accepts a suitor. Sometimes, she does not." Selina's voice was dreamy, as if she were talking more to herself than to Lady Dustan.

Lady Dustan stared at the young woman, startled by the matter-of-fact way in which she talked of the bull elephant mounting the female.

Selina smiled sweetly. "Pray, Lady Dustan, you will forgive me. I have been learning at Sir Radford's side for too long. I am a student of animal nature."

Lady Dustan was glad to see the manor house in the distance. "It will

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be lovely to get away from the dust and the heat," she observed, not caring to talk further of elephants and their choices.

At dinner that evening, George sat just across from Lydia and Mary. Throughout the meal, he was aware that Lady Dustan was trying to draw him into conversation. He answered her queries politely, but his attention was focused on the other end of the table, where William Gordon was chatting with Sir Radford about future additions to the menagerie and how he might assist Sir Radford in obtaining some rare specimens. Though William directed his comments to Sir Radford, it was clear to George that he intended them for Selina's ears. Every promise he made to Sir Radford spoke well of his own courage, his resourcefulness, his adventurous ways — all designed to win the heart of a young lady.

After dinner, Lady Dustan insisted that Mary entertain them with a song at the pianoforte while George and Lydia played whist with her and Sir Radford, allowing George no way to gracefully excuse himself. The game lasted until just before sunset, when George made his escape. With uncharacteristic forcefulness, he insisted that Mary take his place at the table, a request to which she obligingly acquiesced.

While the game continued, George left the house to stroll in the garden. The only purpose he admitted to himself was the need for fresh air, after the closeness of the parlor. He had had several glasses of wine with dinner and was feeling a trifle light-headed. He was not searching for Selina, though she had left the manor house just after dinner, saying that she wanted to do some sketching. He was certainly not searching for William, whose absence from the parlor he had noted not long before he set out.

The sun was setting and the full moon was rising, casting silver light over the menagerie. In the moonlight, the peacocks that strutted across the lawn were no brighter than English sparrows, their brilliant colors fading to shades of gray in the dim light. The macaws stirred as he strolled past, and one bird called after him — "You're a bounder, you are!"

By the hyena enclosure, he found Selina's sketch pad abandoned on the wooden bench. The three hyenas were awake and alert. The largest of the three, the one that Selina had been drawing that morning, was pacing the length of the iron fence that confined them, whining in her throat and

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staring past him, down the path that led to the downs. The other two answered her whines with strange yaps and growls.

George Paxton took up the sketchpad, gazing about him. "Miss Selina?" he called. "Where are you?" The garden was quiet. In the moonlight, he opened the sketchpad and studied the pencil drawings within. A sketch of the tiger, her eyes glaring through the bars of the cage. A sketch of the hyena lounging in the sun, perhaps the one that Selina had been drawing when he encountered her that morning. Another sketch of the hyena enclosure — the same iron grillwork, the same drooping tree, the same boulder. But the hyena was gone. In place of the beast, in the center of the enclosure, an elderly woman with an air of dissipation and sloth, reclined on a high-backed sofa.

Something about the lady — perhaps her toothy smile or the intensity of her gaze — reminded George Paxton of the beast. The woman wore a shabby fur collar that had markings similar to those on the hyena's coat. In the carefully penciled shadows behind her, Mr. Paxton could make out another face — a coarse, ill-tempered young man, the old woman's son, he would guess. He did not like the look of the man, lurking in the shadows and waiting for an opportunity to do ill. A drunkard and a coward, he thought, ready to pick a man's pocket or slit his throat.

George frowned, wondering at Selina's fancy. Why had she drawn two people in the hyena enclosure and why such unattractive subjects?

Uneasy, George closed the sketchbook and looked around him for other signs of Selina. The hyenas were staring toward the downs. Following their gaze, he saw something white, fluttering on the fence. He stepped closer and found a woman's dress — Selina's dress — hanging from the wrought iron. Beside the dress, a delicate chemise, carefully worked with delicate white embroidery, blew in the evening breeze. On the ground, a pair of stockings, neatly tucked into the toes of a pair of lady's shoes. To convince himself he was not imagining things, George touched the chemise, feeling its silky fabric against his hand.

What could be happening? Selina was naked, somewhere in the garden. The thought of it warmed his blood — and chilled him in that same moment. He imagined her graceful limbs, bare and pale in the moonlight.

And William Gordon was somewhere nearby. Could William dare take advantage of a young woman of Selina's station? Could Selina be so

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lost to her family, to all propriety, that she would throw herself into the power of a scoundrel? Surely she could see that William Gordon was not a man to be trusted.

George stood frozen by the fence, not knowing what to do, when he heard a low wail in the distance. The wail rose to an eerie shriek — the howling of a hound. Then the hyenas began a hideous cacophony of barks and yelps and yapping wails that sounded for all the world like lunatic laughter. Over the hyenas' noise, he heard a man's voice calling desperately for help.

The path toward the downs was shaded from the moonlight by trees, a dark and lonely way that led to open pasture land. A group of Gypsies had encamped not far off — George remembered Sir Radford had mentioned them. Perhaps the hound was theirs.

Again, the distant howling, barely audible above the eerie wailing of the hyenas. No Gypsy cur could make a sound like that. The howling was that of a wild beast on the hunt.

George ran down the dark path, heedless of his own welfare, seeking only to find the danger — whether it took the form of man or beast — and protect Selina from it. In the darkness, he could not see his way. A patch of mud, slippery from the late afternoon showers, caught him unaware. His feet went out from under him. He slipped, he tumbled, he fell headlong into the ditch beside the lane. His head came down on a rock, a stout piece of English stone. And then he lay very still, unconscious and rescuing no one.

The morning found him in the ditch still, eyes blinking as he slowly came to consciousness. His clothes were muddy and torn and wet with dew. His mind was not quite his own, still muddled from the blow to his head. When he lifted a hand to his forehead, it came away sticky with blood.

He lifted his head and gazed about him. A shady country lane. The song of birds in the hedge. An ordinary scene, with nothing to frighten a man. His alarm of the night before — surely it had been a dream. Selina's clothes on the fence. The sounds of a savage beast. Surely he had imagined these things.

With an effort, he climbed from the ditch and stood for a moment in the lane, staring at the treacherous patch of mud that had caused his

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precipitous plunge into the ditch. Beside the marks left by his own skidding feet were three other sets of prints. Two sets of prints headed out toward the open pasture — the marks left by a man's boots and the paw prints of a large dog. By the length of the stride, George guessed that the man was running — running for his life. In more than one place, the paw prints overlay the boot prints, an indication that the beast followed the man — close at his heels, perhaps.

Heading back in the opposite direction, toward the manor house, was a set of human footprints, left by someone walking without shoes. A delicate foot — that of a child or a woman, George thought. He shook his head, attempting to clear away the fog that prevented him from thinking.

"Mr. Paxton! Whatever happened to you?" George turned toward the house and saw Selina hurrying down the lane, her arms stretched toward him.

"I do not know...." he began. "I cannot say...." As she reached him, her arms held out to support him, his legs trembled beneath him. "You are well," he murmured. "That is all I ask. I thought...I heard a beast howling in the darkness. I feared you were out on the downs with Mr. Gordon. I was afraid for you." He glanced at Selina, then felt himself color as he realized that he was suggesting an impropriety on her part. But she continued to regard him steadily. "I wanted to help. But instead I fell in the ditch." Again, he felt himself color, feeling that she could not help but think him clumsy and undignified in his rescue attempt.

"That was very gallant of you," Selina said softly. "Though your efforts were unnecessary, I thank you for them. Now you must allow me to help you back to the house."

And so the lady he had thought to rescue was the very one who helped him back to the manor house, draping his arm over her shoulders in a most familiar manner and insisting that he lean on her in his weakness. George was too muddled to appreciate the warmth of her body alongside his at that moment, though later he recalled it with great pleasure.

As they approached the manor house, Selina's calls for assistance were heard by Lydia and Mary, who fetched a manservant to help George inside. As the man helped George, the young women kept pace. They were flushed with excitement, and Lydia was talking so quickly that her words tripped over each other.

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"Whatever has happened to Mr. Paxton! Oh, what a morning this is! We never have any excitement like this at home."

Between Lydia's exclamations, Mary told George what had happened. "They found poor Mr. Gordon out on the downs, collapsed in exhaustion, his clothes torn and muddy. He had been running all through the night, chased by a wild beast. The men brought him home not minutes ago."

"A beast was chasing Gordon?" George asked dully.

"It must have been a terrible beast, don't you think?" Lydia exclaimed. "He is such a brave man and a great hunter. He's accustomed to lions and tigers and such — I thought that nothing could frighten him."

"He said it was a terrible, fierce wolf," Lydia said. "With glowing eyes and fangs. Though I've never heard of such a creature in Devonshire."

George's bloody arrival added to the confusion at the manor house. William had been carried upstairs only moments before. The physician who had been called to attend to William's wounds ministered to George as well, cleaning his head wound and advising rest for both men.

George slept the morning through. In the middle of the afternoon, he joined the rest of the company for tea. Lady Dustan insisted he sit in a chair by the fire, though the afternoon was warm. By the time he had finished his first cup of tea, he felt he had told his story of the past evening far too many times, and had heard William recount his at least twice that number.

His own story did not change with retelling. He had heard a beast howling and a man shouting. (He did not, out of respect for William, say that the man was screaming in terror.) He ran to help; he tripped and fell. He did not mention discovering Selina's clothing — only her sketchpad.

William's story, George observed, improved each time he told it, which Lydia pressed him to do, again and again. The first time William told it, he was as subdued as ever George had seen him, his face pale with the memory of the beast snapping and snarling at his heels as he ran. He had been out for a walk in the light of the full moon when the beast dashed from the bushes, attacking without warning. He had nothing with which to defend himself and no matter how he had tried to circle and return to the house, the creature had cut him off, almost as if it knew of his desire. He had called out for help, but no one had come.

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The second time he told the tale, he recalled more details. He had kicked at the creature, while it snapped at his boots, its eyes glowing in the moonlight, the foam of madness on its lips. "With a stout walking stick, I would have triumphed." He smiled grimly, inviting his listeners to consider how the beast would have suffered if he had been armed. "But without any weapon, there was little I could do."

By the fifth accounting, William was no longer pale and his story had been embellished with many details. He had taken a tumble down one grassy knoll, but had succeeded (having learned something of acrobatics from a sailor aboard his ship) in rolling back to his feet and running on. He had snatched up a handful of dust and cast it into the creature's eyes, slowing its advance. He had been brave and resourceful — though of course he did not say that directly. He left that to Lydia, who exclaimed frequently at his heroism.

George sat quietly by the fire, listening and watching. He noticed Selina, on the other side of the room, was doing the same.

THE PHYSICIAN had advised George to rest, sit in the sun, and take moderate exercise. The next day, George used that as an excuse to stroll in the menagerie, avoiding company. He was passing by the elephant enclosure when he met William, walking along the path in the opposite direction. George invited William to sit for a time in the shade, hoping to find out more about Selina and how her clothes had come to be hung on the hyena enclosure.

With a little encouragement, William provided a complete account of his evening before the beast had appeared. He had gone out for a walk after dinner, in search of Selina. He had come upon her by the hyena enclosure. "She said that she preferred to sit in solitude," he told George, "but in my experience young women rarely admit their true feelings. I detected an eagerness and an energy in her manner that convinced me that her protests were not heartfelt. Finally, I acquiesced, saying that I would return to the house alone, and I left her, proceeding down the path toward the house. But I did not go far. As I walked, the full moon rose above the trees and I thought of how the sight of it might awaken romantic thoughts in a young woman's heart. At that thought, I decided to speak with her again. I was

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almost to the spot I had left her when the beast emerged from the bushes and set upon me, chasing me down the path, away from the house, snarling and snapping at my heels."

"I must have been moments behind you," George said. "When I came to the hyena enclosure, Miss Selina was gone, though I found her sketchpad." He did not mention that he had also found her clothing, a puzzling and indelicate detail that he saw no reason to share with William.

"Miss Selina told me that she returned to the house by another path," William said. "She must have left the hyena enclosure shortly before you arrived."

George nodded, thinking of Selina and the clothing she had abandoned and wondering where she had been.

"It was a terrible night," William said. "The worst of my life."

The next day, the afternoon was bright and clear. George was taking the sun by the tiger cage when Sir Radford came upon him and inquired after his health. When George indicated that he was feeling much recovered, Sir Radford sat on the bench beside him. From her cage, the great tiger lay in a patch of sun, watching the men through narrowed eyes.

"And how are you doing, old beast?" Sir Radford said to the big cat in a conversational tone. The tiger stood and stretched, then strolled over to rub her chin against the bars. Sir Radford reached out and scratched behind the animal's ear, eliciting a giant rumbling purr. "I brought her back from India myself," he told George. "Got her as a cub."

George watched the big cat's eyes close in contented response to Sir Radford's attentions. "You are doing precisely what Miss Lydia wished to do," George commented.

Sir Radford nodded. "That is so. But I felt it would not have been good to encourage Miss Lydia."

"Of course. Being strong-willed, she would have insisted on trying to do the same. And though the tiger enjoys your attentions, she might not tolerate Miss Lydia's. It does not pay to force your attentions on a wild beast who does not want them."

From the corner of his eye, George saw Sir Radford cast a considering glance in his direction. For a moment, Sir Radford was silent, then he

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spoke in a low tone. "I think you understand a good deal more than you let on, Mr. Paxton. That's an admirable trait in such a young man."

George hesitated, wondering what had encouraged such flattery from Sir Radford. He was pleased to be complimented on his understanding, but baffled as to what Sir Radford thought it was that he understood.

Sir Radford leaned back on the bench and returned to studying the tiger. "Selina told me of your concern for her well-being. Under the circumstances as you saw them at the time, it was bold of you to try to run to her rescue."

George felt his cheeks grow hot, as he remembered his failure. He did not know what to say and he was puzzled by Sir Radford's phrasing: "under the circumstances as he saw them at the time." How was he to understand them differently now? There was a wild beast on the prowl, William Gordon was in fear of his life, and Selina had left her clothes by the hyena enclosure. How was one to understand such circumstances?

"Of course, being a man of discernment, you have realized now that my daughter did not need rescuing. I'm glad of that." Sir Radford clapped him on the shoulder. "Let me just say that Selina and I are very well pleased that Lady Dustan included you in her party."

"Thank you, Sir Radford," George said, resolving to ask for an explanation, even though that request would betray his lack of discernment. "I..."

"No, no. Do not say too much," Sir Radford interrupted, smiling broadly. "Some things are better left unspoken." Before George could say another word, the old gentleman stood and strode away down the path with great vigor.

George shook his head, wondering what it was that Sir Radford had supposed he was about to say and wishing that he possessed the perceptive nature with which that good man credited him. For a time, he sat alone in the sun, where he could think without interruption of all that he had seen and heard. Somehow, Selina had not needed rescuing, though she was naked on the downs. And the reason was one that Sir Radford would rather not speak aloud.

Over the last few days, Selina had, more than once, made a point of seeking him out. At dinner, she had made quiet conversation with him, while William held forth to Mary and Lydia about his travels on the Dark

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Continent — beginning over the soup with a description of an elephant hunt and ending during dessert with a tale of his narrow escape from angry savages. Selina had ignored William's tales, obviously preferring to talk with George. He had been struck once again with admiration for both her beauty and her disposition, for she spoke her mind with serenity and confidence on many topics — from the animals in the menagerie to books she had recently read. Talking with her, he could not imagine her being taken in by William's bluster. But what else could explain her clothes on the fence?

He was puzzling over the matter, making no progress, when he saw Selina coming down the path toward him. "Would you take a turn through the garden?" she asked him sweetly.

He offered the lady his arm.

She commented on the weather and he agreed that it was the perfect temperature, the perfect day. They were silent for a time and he cast about for another topic of conversation. "Have you been sketching lately?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Not so much. With all the alarms and confusions, there has not been time."

"I confess, the other night...." He hesitated, for he could not remember the other night without blushing for his failure and thinking of her nakedness. "...I took the liberty of glancing in your sketchbook. I should not have done so, but I could not resist the temptation. I was struck by your skill, by the delicacy of line. I was particularly struck by the woman who bore such a strange and uncanny resemblance to the hyena."

She was smiling. "I was inspired by Mr. Gordon's tales of Africa. And it struck me — if a woman can become a wolf when the moon is full, perhaps the transformation can proceed in the opposite direction. But of course, these are ordinary hyenas."

He glanced at her and found her smiling, a sly and playful look in her hazel eyes. He considered her words, remembered Sir Radford's words, and realized how she might have been naked on the downs but never in danger.

"Of course," he said slowly, then took a deep breath. "Ordinary hyenas." He found his eyes drawn to her hand — fair and delicate, the hand of a lady, meant for playing the pianoforte and sketching in the garden. He imagined that hand transforming to become the paw of the beast who had

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left her tracks in the mud. Such a marvel, such a mystery, such a fascinating secret. He lifted his eyes to meet hers. She was smiling.

"The hunt in which your father was killed," he said at last. "I would suppose that was a wolf hunt."

She nodded. "A tragic misunderstanding. Sir Radford went hunting on the night of the full moon, having failed to understand my father's warnings. He shot a wolf — and found himself with the body of his friend."

They walked in silence for a few minutes. George was very aware of the warmth of her hand on his arm. As they strolled along the path toward the hyena enclosure, George heard William's voice, though he could not make out the words. "Let us turn here," Selina suggested. "Mr. Gordon is telling Lydia about the animals and I would rather not disturb them."

George followed her lead, quite willing to avoid conversation with William and Lydia. "Mr. Gordon seems to have taken no permanent harm from his night of terror on the downs," he remarked. "In fact, I think the experience might well improve his character."

"You are an optimistic man," she said.

George hesitated, uncertain of the propriety of what he was about to say, then plunged ahead. "Mr. Gordon seems to feel he knows a great deal about what women want. I suspect that..." Again, he hesitated. "I suspect that Mr. Gordon did not behave toward you as a gentleman should behave toward a lady."

She continued to smile. "He thought that I favored him — but he was not a terribly observant man. A better observer would have noticed the one I truly favored."

George found himself unable to speak. Could she mean that she favored him? There was nothing else she could mean.

"You have nothing to say, Mr. Paxton."

"I have too much to say," he began. "My heart overflows with more admiration and affection than I can begin to express." But for all that he said he could not, George continued, telling her of his feelings and avowing his love and admiration in tender words.

For days after, the neighborhood could talk of nothing other than the alarms and confusions of that night. A great hunter, pursued by a vicious

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beast. A young man, injured in his attempts to offer assistance. Both were made out to be heroes, after a fashion.

The identity of the beast that had pursued William through the moonlit night remained a mystery to the community. The first conjecture — that the animal was an escapee from Sir Radford's menagerie — proved false, for all of that noble gentleman's charges were accounted for. The Gypsy band was located and the dogs owned by the band were examined. They were, by all reports, a mangy lot, but none of them seemed large or energetic enough to menace a strong man like William Gordon. Sir Radford led many hunts, as did William Gordon when he had recovered. But no animal answering to William's description of the beast could be found.

Before Lady Dustan left Selwyn Park to return to London, she arranged for a small party at the manor house, wishing to mark the occasion of her departure. For that event, the manor house was splendidly lit up and quite full of company.

Lady Dustan and Mary were listening to Gordon talk about his upcoming expedition to Africa, when Lydia interrupted to invite Gordon to join a game of whist. Initially Gordon was reluctant, but Lydia insisted. "You know you are my favorite partner, my darling. I can't play without you."

"It seems my services are required at the whist table," he told Lady Dustan and Mary, and allowed himself to be led away.

Lady Dustan smiled after the couple approvingly. "It is wonderful to see Lydia so much in love. And I believe I shall come to be quite fond of Gordon. Lydia seems quite willing to take him in hand and calm his warm, unguarded temper. That is, of course, a wife's role. And that role will, I think, soothe Lydia's own excitable nature. It's a fine match. I'm quite confident that Mr. Gordon will be calling on your father when we return to London."

"Miss Selina and Mr. Paxton seem to have an amiable attachment to one another as well," Mary said. "I do believe they have become close friends."

"Friends?" Lady Dustan smiled at Mary as a mother smiles at a foolish child. "If you think that will lead to romance, I will tell you that you are mistaken. A man and wife have no business being friends. That's like a friendship between...between a man and a tiger."

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"Ah," Mary said. "Like a man and a tiger." Just that morning, she had, while wandering in the garden, caught a glimpse of Sir Radford scratching the ears of the tiger. He had made her swear she would not tell the others, lest they be tempted to attempt to try the same — to their peril.

"Certainly," Lady Dustan said. "There could be no question of friendship there."

Mary nodded, keeping her own council and acquiescing to Lady Dustan's firmly held belief.

After her return to London, Lady Dustan was astounded to receive a letter from Sir Radford indicating that George had asked for Selina's hand in marriage. She returned to Selwyn Park for the wedding.

At Selina's request, with Sir Radford's enthusiastic assent, and despite Lady Dustan's earnest protestations, the wedding itself did not take place in the manor house chapel, as would have been customary and proper. Instead, the couple was joined in matrimony *alfresco*, on the lawn beneath the shade trees near the elephant enclosure. Throughout the ceremony, Lady Dustan kept a nervous eye on the elephants. Fortunately the bull elephant spent his time placidly watching the goings on and flapping his ears idly. He behaved himself and gave Lady Dustan no cause for alarm or retreat, for which she was very grateful.

George continued his work with the Zoological Society, dividing his time between London and Selwyn Park. Selina accompanied him to the city. Her grace and charm (and the fortune that she would have from Sir Radford) made her welcome in the Paxton home.

Lydia and Gordon were married as well, in a splendid (though conventional) wedding in London.

Mary, benefiting from the observation of these two very different marriages, formed her own opinion of the connections possible between men and women, between humans and beasts. Though her understanding of the matter differed substantially from Lady Dustan's, she never endeavored to share her views on the vagaries of the human heart with that formidable individual.

Though Selina and George enjoyed London, they retained their affection for Selwyn Park. Every month, she and George returned to the country for the night of the full moon.

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CURIOSITIES

THE UNHOLY CITY

BY CHARLES FINNEY, 1937

HEILAR-WEY is a futuristic city, where mile-wide boulevards are traversed by ninety-mile-an-hour taxicabs, where thousands are killed every hour in cataclysmic traffic pile-ups, where a newspaper is produced every fifteen minutes to report on the armed struggles between the elderly and the unemployed. Yet like an Escher drawing, the city folds in on itself, the vast metropolis at the mercy of a single escaped tiger, which is invariably causing havoc (and rubbernecking tie-ups) the next neighborhood over.

When Finney is remembered it's for *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, a Bradburyesque collision of small town Americana and a mythological sideshow. *The Unholy City* was Finney's follow-up, and it abandons the familiarity of small-town life for a plunge into surrealism: in Heilar-Wey, the contemporary and the mythological aren't separated by the bars of sideshow cages. We explore the city in a single evening, from the perspective of two travellers: the Falstaffian Vicq Ruiz, who, experiencing a premonition of his own death, is intent on one last revel in Heilar-Wey's nightlife, and the oddly passive narrator, who lends Ruiz money and tries to keep him out of trouble. The two hurtle through the city in taxicabs, drinking, chasing women, and skirting enlistment in the unemployment wars. They also constantly buy newspapers to track the depredations of the tiger — and for the crossword puzzles.

Finney's book has the texture of an allegorical dream. The present, it suggests, is a collision between a crushingly indifferent future and a primal mythological past. His two misfit travelers would be troublemakers in a gentler place, but in Heilar-Wey they can only cling to their notions of fate and romance, try to avoid traffic accidents, and keep out of the path of that tiger.

—Jonathan Lethem

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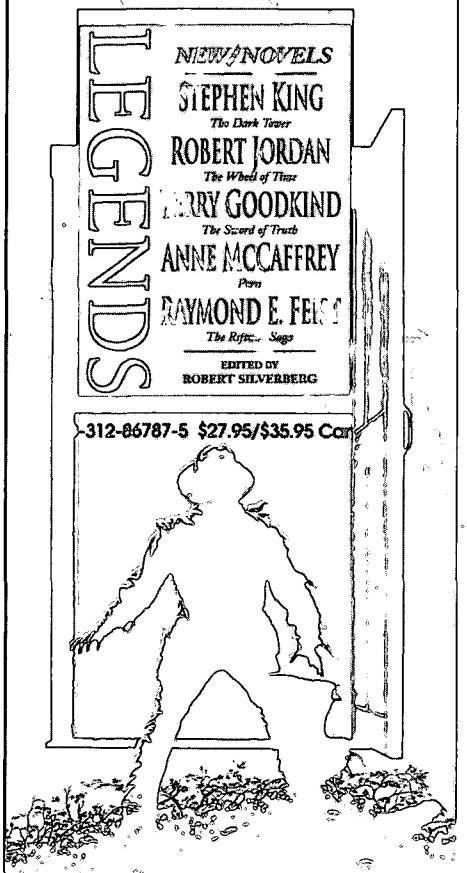

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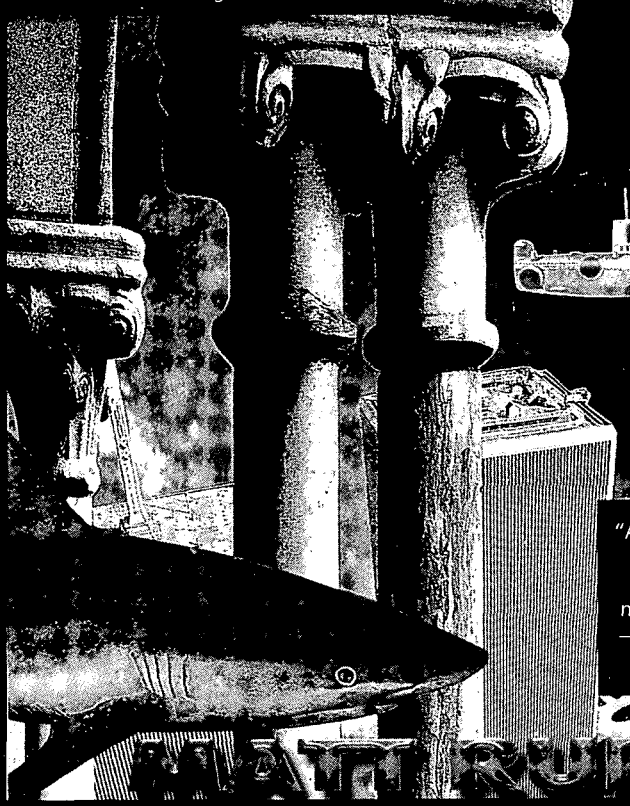

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